INTRODUCTION:

Psychoanalysis and Buddhism as Cultural Institutions

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Freud and the Dalai Lama

Although there was a flurry of interest in Buddhism by psychoanalytic thinkers such as Erich Fromm and Karen Horney in the 1950s and 1960s, this interest to some extent went underground until recent years. Currently, however, there is a marked resurgence of interest in the topic, as reflected in the popularity of books by authors such as Mark Epstein (1995, 1998, 2001), Jeffrey Rubin (1996), John Suler (1993), Anthony Molino (1998), and Barry Magid (2002). Epstein’s books in particular seem to have struck a chord with both a nonprofessional audience and the psychoanalytic community. This increased interest parallels the tremendous popularity of Buddhism in popular culture, where, to paraphrase John Lennon’s quip about the Beatles being more popular than Jesus Christ, the Dalai Lama wins the contest with Sigmund Freud, hands down. While the devout analyst may regard this statement as sacrilegious, like it or not, Buddhism gives every sign of being here to stay within our culture, and its influence on psychoanalytic thinking is growing.

How can we understand the growing interest by psychoanalysts in Buddhism? Psychoanalysis emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century when the secular worldview was ascendant. During this period the modernist
worldview and the remarkable achievements of scientific rationalism were making the belief in God increasingly difficult for many people. Freud (1927, 1930) recognized that one of the primary functions of religion is to provide people with comfort in the face of the inevitable cruelties and indignities of life. But he believed that religion is an immature and self-deluding attempt to find comfort in the belief in the existence of an all-powerful and divine father figure. Instead, like many secularly oriented people of his day, he placed his faith in science.

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, people no longer have the faith in science they once had, and the existential vacuum created by the death of God has become more pronounced than ever. It has become clear that psychoanalysis is not a science in the same sense that physics or chemistry are, but rather a secular form of spirituality. In some ways it functions to fill the void that was once filled by religion. But psychoanalysis does not focus extensively on the deeper existential questions that religions ask: What is the meaning of life in the face of our mortality? How do we as individuals fit in with the larger cosmos? How do we find meaning in the midst of the pain, suffering, and loss that are inevitably part of life?

Although many people in our culture experience a spiritual hunger, it is difficult if not impossible for somebody with a secular worldview to return to the religious worldview of premodern times. As the sociologist Philip Reiff (1966) has pointed out, the religious man of premodern times has been replaced by psychological man, and psychoanalysis has played an important role in this transformation. One of the appeals of Buddhism to a secular, psychoanalytic culture is that it is not a religion in the Judeo-Christian model, with belief in God and a theological doctrine demanding a leap of faith. As Stephen Batchelor (1997) puts it, Buddhism is a “religion without beliefs,” or in Alan Watts’s (1996) words, “a religion of no-religion.” This makes Buddhism an appealing religion for the post-religious, postmodern person with a hunger for religion but no stomach for religious belief.

While the assertion that Buddhism does not require any kind of religious faith is true up to a point, the reality is more complex. Buddhism, like psychoanalysis, is a heterogeneous tradition with different schools and conflicting and seemingly contradictory beliefs. Both Buddhism and psychoanalysis are cultural institutions that originally developed as expressions of the values and the complex tensions and contradictions within their
cultures of origins. Both are systems of healing that have evolved over time as culture has evolved, as the configuration of the self has evolved, and as new cultures have assimilated them. And both have transformed the cultures in which they have evolved. Today's psychoanalysis is very different from Freud's, and American psychoanalysis is very different from French. The meaning of Buddhism is very different for a contemporary North American or European than for an Indian Buddhist in the Axial Age or for a medieval Chinese Buddhist, and the function that the assimilation of Buddhist ideas into psychoanalytic theory and practice plays can be understood only if we know something about how this process of assimilation expresses contemporary cultural values, tensions, and problems.

In this introduction I examine the cultural contexts in which both psychoanalysis and Buddhism emerged and the ways they have evolved. I also examine some of the internal tensions that both psychoanalysis and Buddhism have struggled with over time, as well as the various ways in which these two traditions have reflected these tensions. One source of this struggle in both traditions has been the tension between the poles of agnosticism (or atheism) and faith (or commitment). Another has been tension between the poles of individualistic and communal orientations. Through cross-cultural comparison I begin a dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis, with the objective of exploring various ways in which the two traditions can complement one another.

The Cultural Origins of Psychoanalysis

As Reiff (1966) has argued, psychoanalysis developed during a period in which the traditional religious values and symbols that held the community together were breaking down. Religious systems play the dual roles of integrating the individual with the community and of providing a system of communally held symbols and rituals that heal individuals who experience emotional distress. These traditional systems of healing function by giving some sense of meaning to the individual's suffering and by reintegrating the alienated individual into the community. This process of healing involves an act of faith and commitment to the values of the community, and through that commitment, one experiences salvation. For this reason Reiff refers to these traditional systems of healing as commitment therapies. In order for therapies
of this sort to work, there has to be an intact, coherent community to which one recommits oneself. When psychoanalysis originated, the religious worldview that had dominated Western culture was no longer functioning in a cohesive and fully viable fashion. The traditional value system was fragmenting. Nietzsche had already proclaimed the death of God, and the secular worldview was securing its hold on the modern mind. Reiff sees psychoanalysis as qualitatively different from traditional systems of healing. From his perspective, psychoanalysis is not a therapy of commitment but rather an approach that liberates people from the type of commitment required by traditional religion and other social institutions.

As he points out, the goal of psychoanalysis for Freud was not to help the individual to recommit himself or herself to the values of the community but rather to learn to manage the strains of living as an individual detached from community. Part of Freud's concern was that the existing cultural value system was repressive, or at least that people responded to the demands of society through harshly or rigidly repressing their instincts, thereby giving rise to psychological symptoms. He emphasized the importance of becoming aware of our underlying instinctual passions and then using our rational capacities to modulate or tame them in a reflective rather than a rigid fashion. In this way, Freud believed, people could develop the ability to choose how to act, rather than be ruled unconsciously by their instinctual passions or by their unconscious, rigid defenses against them. His emphasis was thus on rational renunciation rather than irrational or unconscious suppression.

Thus, as Reiff sees it, the analyst, unlike the priest who speaks for organized religion, "speaks for the individual buried alive, as it were, in the culture. To be thus freed from a tyrannical cultural super-ego is to be properly bedded in the present world. Analysis is not an initiation but a counter-initiation, to end the need for initiations" (1966, 77). Freud had no interest in providing people with any form of salvation. In important respects his value system was consistent with the values of science and the modern era. From this perspective, knowledge is power, and self-knowledge allows choice. To Freud's way of thinking, the mature individual is a realist, and the realist does not need the comforts of religion, which he regarded as illusion.

But as Reiff argues, there has always been an ongoing tension within psychoanalysis between Freud's insistence that psychoanalysis not be a therapy of commitment in the traditional religious sense, and the need to find the type
of meaning and salvation afforded by more traditional cultural institutions of healing. In contrast to Freud’s “hermeneutic of suspicion” (Ricoeur 1970), Alfred Adler offered a philosophy of social commitment. Jung attempted to breathe new life into religion by relocating the gods inside man as archetypes. Reich developed a psychology of sexual/energetic mysticism. More recently analysts such as Wilfred Bion (1970), Michael Eigen (1998), and James Grotstein (2000) have developed approaches that attempt to reincorporate the spiritual through what can by thought of as a type of psychoanalytic mysticism.

Moreover, what Reiff failed to realize is that in certain respects psychoanalysis itself is a therapy of faith or commitment. Increasingly, analysts are realizing that the analytic process is not free of suggestion and persuasion, and that a certain degree of indoctrination into the analyst’s value system is both inevitable and desirable. Irwin Hoffman (1998) has been particularly articulate in his discussion of the role that “analytic authority” plays. He reminds us that Freud (1926) himself thought of the analyst as a “secular pastoral worker” and recognized that he or she plays the role of an intimate, loving authority who has continuity with the kind of authority that parents have. Freud believed that this authority should be used to persuade patients to come to terms with the truth about both their internal and external worlds.

Building on Freud’s own conceptualization of psychoanalysis as an “after-education,” Hoffman borrows the sociological concept of secondary socialization (Berger and Luckmann 1967) to account for the mechanism through which the analytic relationship influences the change process. He argues that just as the child’s initial construction of reality is forged in the crucible of affectively intense human relationships characterized by dependency upon the parent, the change that takes place through psychoanalysis is inevitably dependent upon a new socialization process in which the analyst functions as an intimate and loving authority. Thus in contrast to Reiff, who makes considerable effort to distinguish psychoanalysis from the type of change process that takes place through what he termed therapies of commitment, many contemporary analysts argue that psychoanalysis inevitably involves some degree of socialization into the value system of the analyst and the analytic community (e.g., Hoffman 1998; Renik 1996).\footnote{Another way in which psychoanalysis has elements of a therapy of commitment is in its tendency to develop doctrinal positions that the faithful must adhere to in order to be considered “true analysts.” As Greenberg and}
Mitchell (1983) pointed out, for many years Freud’s drive theory was the litmus test of whether one was a real analyst, and rejection of drive theory could lead to excommunication from the profession. And even within postmodern and pluralistic circles, the belief in the importance of “throwing away the book” is becoming a new doctrine of sorts (Hoffman 1994; Greenberg 2001).

**Psychoanalysis and the Culture of Individualism**

Another important shift in psychoanalytic sensibility that has taken place over time has involved an increased emphasis on the importance of the development of an authentic, vital sense of self and on the construction of personal meaning. Freud emphasized the importance of learning to negotiate the tensions between our instincts and civilization in a constructive fashion. As Mitchell has argued, many contemporary analysts are more interested in helping patients construct personal meaning for themselves: “What the patient needs is not a rational reworking of unconscious infantile fantasies; what the patient needs is a revitalization and expansion of his own capacity to generate experience that feels real, meaningful, and valuable…. If the goal of psychoanalysis in Freud’s day was rational understanding and control (secondary process) over fantasy-driven, conflictual impulses (primary process), the goal of psychoanalysis in our day is most often thought about in terms of the establishment of a richer, more authentic sense of identity” (1993, 24).

This shift in psychoanalytic sensibility corresponds to an important shift in cultural landscape from Freud’s time to ours. Psychoanalysis was born during a period when individualism was in the process of becoming more pronounced. In the Victorian culture of Freud’s time, the self was viewed as dangerous, and an emphasis was placed on self-mastery or self-control (Cushman 1995). Over the last century the culture of individualism has continued to evolve, and the individual has become increasingly isolated from the community. This is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the more individuated person of contemporary culture is freer of the potentially suffocating influence of the community. On the other, he or she is cut off from the sense of meaning and well-being that potentially flows from being integrated with the wider community.

According to Philip Cushman (1995) the disintegration of the unifying
web of belief and values that traditionally brought people together and gave life meaning has resulted in the development of what he refers to as the empty self. This empty self experiences the lack of tradition, community, and shared meaning as an internal hollowness, a lack of personal conviction and worth, and a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger.

Christopher Lasch (1979), in a similar vein, argues that the breakdown of traditional cultural values and the fragmentation of societal structures, which traditionally provided a unifying web of meaning, has resulted in the development of a culture of narcissism. The individual in contemporary culture tends to be narcissistic in the sense that he has a grandiose or inflated sense of his own uniqueness and abilities. This grandiose and hyper-individuated sense of self is a defensive attempt to cope with the underlying sense of fragility and isolation resulting from the breakdown of traditional social structures and unifying webs of meaning. As Lasch sees it, the institutions of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have developed to fill the cultural void left by the breakdown of traditional cultural institutions. The danger, however, is that psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy can perpetuate or exacerbate the pathology that they are attempting to remedy. By focusing on the enrichment of the self they can create pathological individualism. The popularity of theorists such as D. W. Winnicott, with his emphasis on the true self, and Heinz Kohut, with his normalization of narcissism, can be seen as a reflection of the deeply entrenched sense of individualism in contemporary culture.²

Whereas people once saw personal contentment as a byproduct of living a good or moral life, in contemporary culture the pursuit of happiness risks becoming a goal in and of itself. There is thus a perpetuation of the narcissistic goal of pursuing self-enhancement or of shoring up the self. Because of the sense of isolation produced by the breakdown of traditional social structures, people become increasingly desperate in their pursuit of intimacy. However, intimacy becomes unobtainable as a result of the same circumstances that lead to the intensified search for intimacy in the first place. True intimacy involves the letting go of rigid self-other boundaries that are necessary in order to maintain narcissistic defenses. Because people are so preoccupied with shoring up their narcissistic defenses, intimacy becomes increasingly elusive. In addition, because of the intense isolation resulting from the breakdown of traditional social structures, people have unrealistic expectations about their intimate
relationships or place unrealistic demands upon them, thereby dooming them to failure. People look for the kind of spiritual transcendence in their intimate relationships that traditionally came from religion.

*Relational Developments and the Postmodern Turn*

One of the more important developments in contemporary psychoanalysis consists of the relational perspective (Aron 1996; Benjamin 1988; Ghent 1989; Mitchell 1988). This perspective involves a host of related theoretical developments, which share in common an emphasis on the relational field as the basic unit of study, rather than on the individual as a separate entity. Human beings are regarded as being fundamentally interpersonal in nature; mind is regarded as composed of relational configurations; and self is regarded as constructed in a relational context. Although relational theorists trace their roots as far back as Sandor Ferenczi, the growing impact of the relational perspective on the mainstream is, I believe, a reflection of the intensification of the crisis of individualism in contemporary culture. It can be regarded in part as an attempt to remedy the excesses of a more individualistic perspective. It is also interesting to note that although the relational perspective synthesizes theoretical perspectives from both sides of the Atlantic, American culture has played a particularly significant role in its origin and development. This, I believe, is a reflection of the particularly intense sense of individualism and isolation in the United States. While the relational perspective can be seen as a corrective to the excessive individualism of contemporary culture, at another level it represents a further embodiment of that individualism. By emphasizing the mutuality of the analytic relationship and the analyst’s embeddedness in the relational field, it challenges the traditional sources of analytic authority. This is consistent with the Western democratic emphasis on the challenge of tradition and the location of authority within the individual rather than the social institution.

Another important trend in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking consists of the postmodern turn. Increasingly analysts are emphasizing the constructed nature of human knowledge and the inherent limits of our understanding as analysts (Hoffman 1988; Mitchell 1993; Stern 1997). Constructivist epistemology asserts that reality is intrinsically ambiguous and is
given form only through our interpretation of it. This perspective has profound implications for the nature of analytic authority and goes hand in hand with the increasing democratization of the therapeutic relationship. As we shall see, the shift toward a constructivist epistemology and the recognition that all knowledge is positional is also consistent with developments in traditional Buddhist philosophy.

Associated with the postmodern turn has been a shift toward viewing the self as multiple rather than as unitary (Bromberg 1998; Mitchell 1993; Pizer 1998). This shift reflects a similar shift across a range of different disciplines including philosophy, literary criticism, anthropology, social psychology, cognitive sciences, and neuropsychology. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to speculate extensively about the factors underlying this widespread cultural shift, it is worth dwelling for a moment on its meaning within psychoanalytic thinking, given the parallels between the psychoanalytic conceptualization of self as multiple and the Buddhist conception of self.

In postmodern thought, one of the central impulses underlying the deconstruction of the self is to challenge potentially oppressive functions of tradition and authority. Jacques Derrida, for example, "kills" the author of a text, deprives him or her of ultimate authority, by arguing that the final meaning of a text cannot be settled with reference to the author's intentions. Constructing meaning is an endless hermeneutic enterprise, and the notion of truth is replaced by a ceaseless play of infinite meanings. Michel Foucault challenges what he considers the illusion of self as an autonomous free agent by analyzing the way in which intricate decentered networks of power relations within society lead to the construction of the subjective experience of selfhood.

The current psychoanalytic fascination with self-multiplicity has no doubt been influenced by the faddish nature of this type of thinking. But there are other influences. Susan Fairfield (2001) for example, argues that theories of selfhood do not accurately capture some underling reality but are shaped by various intrapsychic needs of the analyst. She draws our attention to the hidden smugness often associated with critiques of monists (believers in a unitary self) who cling to the comforting belief that there is a stable, cohesive, singular self. She also points out the aggressiveness potentially associated with the desire to challenge conventional boundaries. And she suggests that seeing the self as multiple may also be a counter-phobic
attempt to master fears of self-fragmentation by arguing that the self really is fragmented. She further adds that North American analysts, consistent with the optimism of their culture, tend to think about self-multiplicity in positive terms. For them, a multiple, contradictory self has more potential than the unitary self. In contrast, European theorists who emphasize multiplicity tend to place more importance on the experience of alienation or loss associated with the lack of a unitary self.

Mitchell (2001), while applauding Fairfield’s thoughts about why one might view the self as multiple, also highlights the clinical implications of this view. His central thesis is that the adoption of the perspective of self as multiple helps to liberate us from a view of mental health that emphasizes conformity. In an argument somewhat reminiscent of Jacques Lacan’s, he claims that the American ego-analytic emphasis on ego integration tends to value rational analysis and synthesis and to pathologize emotional intensity. In contrast, openness to a range of different states of being is conducive to greater unpredictability and passion in life. It is interesting to note that in some respects Mitchell’s understanding of the clinical implications of self-multiplicity is consistent with his earlier emphasis (Mitchell 1993) on the centrality of enriching and revitalizing the self. This sensibility is in keeping with Fairfield’s argument that American analysts tend to view the multiple self as a “cornucopia” of possibilities.

**Origins of Buddhism**

Buddhism originated in what is now northeast India during the fifth century B.C.E. During this period Indian civilization was undergoing tremendous ferment. The rural society and agricultural economy were gradually being replaced by a market economy and urban centers. A new culturally diverse and sophisticated merchant class was on the rise; traditional cultural values and religious beliefs were being challenged, and a heightened sense of individualism was emerging. Just as present-day individualism is double-edged, the growing individualism in India seems to have been associated with both malaise and exhilaration.

The agricultural society in which Buddhism developed was static and conservative. It divided society into four rigidly hierarchical castes: priests, warriors, farmers, and servants. These castes were hereditary and were thought to
mirror the archetypal order of the cosmos. Ethical conduct consisted of performing the duties and responsibilities appropriate to one's caste. This worldview, while providing structure and cohesiveness, left little room for social change or individual conscience. The Brahmans, or priests, were in exclusive possession of the sacred knowledge of the Vedas, which spelled out the responsibilities of the castes and the relationships between them. It was the Brahmans' duty and responsibility to enact various sacred rites including animal sacrifice in order to control the universe.

For some time preceding the emergence of Buddhism, a new religious trend had begun to develop, the Upanishadic tradition. It involved a reinterpretation of the Vedas that emphasized the importance of the internal meaning of things over the external, magical significance of sacred rites. At the same time it enshrined the caste system. Central to Upanishadic philosophy is the concept of *atman*, which is equivalent in some respects to our concept of soul. The atman is the essence of the person, which transcends phenomenal experience. It is thus the real self in contrast to the experienced self. This atman is conceptualized as identical with the single unified essence behind appearances. The individual experience of self, and all phenomena in the world, are thus illusions, behind which lies a transcendental reality in which all phenomena are one. The failure to see behind this veil of illusion keeps people trapped in the pain of individuation and the suffering of life and death. Those who fail to recognize their true nature as part of the universal essence experience the pain and sorrow of life, and at death are reborn once again into endless rounds of life and death. The goal is to recognize the illusory nature of the self and to unify the true self or atman with the underlying universal essence. As for the historical conditions that led to the perception of life as being so painful, this is a matter of speculation. It may in part have been related to the stress associated with increased urbanization and the breakdown of traditional values. The rapid buildup of urban centers may have led to an increased incidence of plagues (Gombrich 1988). Regardless of the conditions giving rise to this perspective, however, one of its consequences was a devaluing of sensual and worldly experience in favor of the transcendental.

Two primary practices used for gaining transcendence were meditation and mortification of the flesh. Meditation in this context involved sitting quietly and using a variety of concentrative techniques to focus the mind,
thereby stilling discursive thought. Mortification of the flesh involved subjecting oneself to various physical extremes of cold, heat, hunger, and so on as a way of conquering the demands of the body, thereby experiencing transcendence.

Early Buddhism can be understood as a reaction to this worldview in a number of ways. To begin with, the Buddha denied the existence of an atman, or of any transcendental self or soul. At the same time, he never taught that the self does not exist (as he is often interpreted to have done), but rather argued that the self is nonsubstantial, in the sense that it is constructed on a moment-by-moment basis out of a variety of components: memories, physical sensations, emotions, concepts, dispositions (including both unconscious and inherited conditioning), and so on. Furthermore, he argued that the construction of self is always influenced by ever changing causes and conditions. There is some similarity between this teaching of the Buddha's and the Upanishadic formulation of atman. The underlying assumption in both cases is that the experience of the self as a substantial and isolated entity lies at the heart of the problem, and that the modification of that experience is the cure.

The Buddhist perspective is, however, more moderate in some respects. To begin with, it does not conceptualize the individual self as illusory. Again, what is illusory is the experience of self as substantial or unchanging. From a Buddhist perspective, the self, like everything in this world, is transient or impermanent. Death, illness, and loss are unavoidable aspects of life. Suffering arises as a result of attempting to cling to what we desire and to avoid what causes us pain. Liberation emerges as a result of recognizing the impermanent nature of reality and letting go of our self-centered craving. There is no transcendental self to be realized, as is the case in the Upanishadic worldview, and thus no self that is separate from the aggregates of form and psychological or mental experience. In this respect the Buddhist perspective is less dualistic than the Upanishadic worldview and less likely to give rise to extreme forms of asceticism. The Buddha emphatically rejected extreme asceticism as a spiritual practice and instead proposed what is referred to as the Middle Way, that is, a pathway between the extremes of asceticism and hedonism or sensualism. The goal in Buddhism thus becomes not one of transcending worldly experience but rather one of finding a wiser way of living within it.
This difference plays out in the form of the meditation techniques that are used in the two different traditions. In the Upanishadic tradition meditation tends to involve the concentration of attention upon a particular object of focus for purposes of experiencing an absorption. This results in a withdrawal of the senses from worldly experience, a reduction of internal stimulation, and a resulting experience of peace or tranquillity, which is believed to be associated with the transcendental reality that one wishes to realize.

This form of meditation, which is sometimes referred to as concentration meditation constitutes one form of Buddhist meditation, but in and of itself it is not considered to be sufficient for liberation. The second form of meditation, which plays a role in most Buddhist traditions, consists of detached observation of one's own mind. Concentration meditation plays an important role in helping the individual develop the attentional skill necessary to observe his or her experience in a mindful fashion, but the experience of meditative absorption is not the goal. The objective of this second form of meditation, which is referred to as insight or mindfulness meditation, is to help the meditator develop a greater awareness of the manifold contents of awareness as they unfold, and an ability over time to develop an attitude of nonjudgmental acceptance of the full range of experience. This objective is in keeping with the Buddhist emphasis on learning to live fully in this world rather than on pursuing otherworldly experiences. Mindfulness meditation leads to a greater appreciation of the impermanent or ever changing nature of all phenomena, including the self. It also leads to an appreciation of the role the mind plays in constructing reality.

Another important characteristic of early Buddhist thinking is the rejection of all metaphysical speculation. In this respect Buddhist thinking, at least in its early form and in some contemporary variants, is essentially pragmatic and agnostic in nature. It is pragmatic in the philosophical sense (e.g., Rorty 1982) insofar as truth is defined as that which is effective in relieving human suffering. And it is agnostic in the sense that it refuses to engage in metaphysical speculation. There is a story in which the Buddha used the analogy of a man who is shot by an arrow. In a situation of such urgency, questions such as who made the arrow and what type of bow was used are irrelevant. What is critical is the practical affair of removing the arrow. Similarly, argued the Buddha, metaphysical and cosmological speculation are irrelevant to the task of relieving human suffering. Moreover, committing
oneself to a metaphysical view or a theological doctrine is a form of enslavement. It interferes with the openness essential to enlightenment or true existential awakening.

One of the implications of this feature of early Buddhist thinking was that it undermined the theological structure supporting the caste system. At a social level, then, early Buddhist thinking was a profoundly democratizing force. It subverted the authority of the priestly class and denied the value of ritual observances of a magical nature. Ethical behavior was no longer defined as performing one's duty as a member of one's caste, and no merit was accrued from observing rituals or depending upon the priestly class. Instead ethical action was defined in terms of acting selflessly, according to the precepts of right action.

In some respects the thrust of the early Buddhist tradition was analogous to the thrust of the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Early Buddhists were interested in purifying the Upanishadic tradition of features that they saw as problematic, just as Luther and Calvin wanted to purify Christianity. They wanted to etadicate the magical or superstitious elements, eliminate empty ritual, and establish a more direct relationship between the individual and the experience of salvation (or what the Buddhists refer to as enlightenment). Just as the Protestant Reformation contained a democratizing element, challenging the role of the clergy as divinely empowered intermediaries between the individual and God, Buddhism eliminated the divinely sanctioned role of the priestly class and emphasized the responsibility of the individual for his or her own spiritual destiny. And just as the attempt to purify Christianity of its magical elements had both desirable and undesirable consequences, so did Buddhism’s attempt to purify Indian religion of its magical elements have such consequences. Both developments placed greater emphasis on the inner meaning of spirituality, but both sacrificed some of the magic and mystery that the human heart hungers for.

Tension and Evolution within Buddhist Thinking

Since its inception, Buddhism has struggled with the tension between the pragmatic/agnostic perspective at its core and the need for faith and epistemological certainty and metaphysical absolutism. In many ways this parallels the tension in psychoanalysis between Freud’s vision of psychoanalysis as a purely rational, scientific, analytic approach and the tendency to develop a
new therapy of faith and commitment. One reflection of this tension can be seen in the evolution of Buddhist philosophy. Early Buddhist philosophy and psychology were codified in a body of literature referred to as Abhidharma. This literature emphasizes that the self can be deconstructed into a number of constituent elements. These elements are viewed as arising in dependence upon one another and upon fluctuating causes and conditions. It is on this basis that the self is seen to be lacking in substantiality. In practice, it is held that the meditative process allows one to experience the arising and departing of various constituent elements of the self, and this insight leads to the experience of enlightenment.

Over time, this perspective became reified, and there was a tendency to view the various constituent components of the self as having a fundamental or substantial nature. Various alternative perspectives were offered as to what these fundamental constituents of the self were. Partially in reaction to this trend, the Madhyamika school of philosophy developed. This perspective employed sophisticated linguistic and logical analysis to deconstruct the Abhidharmic analysis of the self into constituent elements and to demonstrate that none of these elements have intrinsic reality. The argument is not that such phenomena are nonexistent, but rather that they are empty of inherent existence. In other words, all phenomena exist in dependence on our construction of them. This perspective anticipated contemporary hermeneutic and constructivist thinking by hundreds of years. The Madhyamika perspective is not a radical constructivism, but rather closer to what Hoffman (1998) refers to as dialectical constructivism. It extends the Buddhist principle of the Middle Way to the epistemological level, by arguing for a position between the extremes of naive realism and radical constructivism. It emphasizes that emptiness itself is only a concept and does not have any intrinsic reality. As Madhyamika philosophers put it, the concept of emptiness is like a medicine—a medicine for the illness of naive realism. But like any medicine, too much of it can make you sick.

Nevertheless, critics of the Madhyamika position interpreted it as a form of radical constructivism, leading to nihilism. The Yogachara school of philosophy attempted to correct what it saw as a tendency toward nihilism in Madhyamika thinking, adopting a position that, in turn, tended toward the metaphysical and transcendental. The Yogachara school holds that both perception and the object of perception spring forth from a single seed, which
is contained in a type of substratum consciousness. This substratum consciousness is likened to a river, which is constantly changing and yet remains the same. It has both personal and universal aspects to it.

Then there is what is referred to as Tathagatagarbha tradition in Buddhism, which holds that all sentient beings are endowed with Buddha nature, and thus have the potential for “awakening” and realizing their intrinsic identity as enlightened beings. This Buddha essence, also referred to as suchness, or in Sanskrit as tathata, is often spoken of as equivalent to emptiness, but it has a more positive quality. It is described as beginningless and endless and as pervading everything. In some traditions this concept of Buddha essence or suchness appears to be taken more literally, thus bordering on the type of substantialism that early Buddhism was reacting against. In other traditions, however, the concept is subjected to the type of deconstructive logic characteristic of the Madhyamika approach.

At a more practical level, the tension between the poles of pragmatism/agnosticism and faith/absolutism is reflected in the way in which the Buddha is conceptualized in different Buddhist traditions. In early Buddhism, and in some forms of contemporary Buddhism, the Buddha is emphatically not seen as a divine figure. He is a human being who became enlightened through his own efforts, and who serves as a model for other spiritual seekers. After his death he was seen as no longer directly active in the world. The Buddha is thus not somebody to be prayed to. Over time various doctrines and traditions developed that viewed the historical Buddha as only one embodiment of the principle of enlightenment. In this view, the cosmos is inhabited by an infinite number of Buddhas—past, present, and future, all of whom have an active presence in the world and help sentient beings attain enlightenment. In various Buddhist traditions, practitioners pray to or petition one or another of the Buddhas, just as Catholics pray to the saints. At the level of philosophical doctrine, there is recognition that these Buddhas do not exist in any absolute sense, that like all phenomena they are empty of intrinsic existence. Nevertheless, at a psychological level they function for people in the same way that saints function in the Catholic tradition, or that gods and goddesses function in premodern cultures.

Another example of this tension can be seen in the role that the belief in rebirth plays in various Buddhist traditions. Despite the fact that early Buddhism rejected the notion of an eternal self or atman, it accepted a notion
of rebirth. As in the Upanishadic tradition, a formulation of the goal in early Buddhism was (and in some forms of contemporary Buddhism continues to be) obtaining release from samsara, or the cycle of death and rebirth. This state of release, referred to as nirvana, is conceptualized as one in which all self-centered craving ceases. And yet at the level of practice the goal is often regarded as one of achieving a better life at the next cycle of rebirth. My impression is that there has always been a tension between the official Buddhist doctrine of anatman, or no-self, and the belief in rebirth. Buddhist philosophy attempts to reconcile this tension in various ways. For example, it is argued that what continues from life to life is not a substantial self or soul but rather a subtle causal connection. The analogy that is used is that of flame passed from candle to candle. The flame that passes from one candle to a next is not exactly the same, but not exactly different either. But to my mind, this resolution is less than completely satisfying. Some Buddhist traditions downplay the importance of the doctrine of rebirth. The Zen tradition, for example, tends to emphasize that good rebirths and bad rebirths are both states of mind.

On the other hand, Tibetan Buddhism places considerable emphasis on the principle of rebirth. In fact there is a tradition of picking important spiritual leaders at an early age because they are believed to be reincarnations of deceased spiritual leaders. For example, the Dalai Lama, who is the supreme spiritual and temporal leader of Tibet, is viewed as the fourteenth incarnation of the first Dalai Lama.

When Buddhism spread to China, it was transformed by the existing culture and by the Taoist and Confucian philosophies that were dominant at the time. Although a variety of different forms of Buddhism developed in China, Chan Buddhism (more commonly known by its Japanese name, Zen) is perhaps the most distinctively Chinese. Zen is often characterized by its direct and down-to-earth quality. Ancient Indian culture tended to prize abstract philosophical thought and metaphysical speculation. It tended to have a world-weary quality. As we have seen, in Upanishadic thinking, life is suffering, and the goal is to seek liberation from the endless round of rebirth by seeing through the illusion of one's individuality. Ancient Chinese thinking had a more optimistic, humanistic, and earthy flavor to it. In Taoist thinking, liberation is obtained by attuning oneself to the natural, spontaneous harmony of the universe—the Tao. This Tao is not something that can
be defined in words or grasped conceptually, and in fact any attempt to do so only interferes with one's ability to function in harmony with it. One can act in accordance with the Tao only when one is able to let go of attempting to grasp it, thereby acting in a spontaneous and unselfconscious fashion. This allows one to be attuned and receptive to the configuration of the moment.

Although the Buddha originally served as a model for the way in which all human beings could become enlightened through their own efforts, subsequent developments in Indian Buddhism tended to present enlightenment as a more and more extraordinary, rarefied, and otherworldly state, available to only the few. Zen tends to bring enlightenment down to earth, as it were, and to demystify and demythologize it.

There is an iconoclastic element to Zen, which was probably influenced by the ancient Taoist image of a sage as somebody who was liberated from convention and from stereotypical thinking. Enlightenment in the Zen tradition tends to be associated with spontaneity and freedom from inhibiting self-consciousness and conformity. Enlightenment is conceptualized as a state in which events are experienced immediately, without the intrusion of reflective self-consciousness. There is a selfless openness to experience.

Buddhism in Tibet took a very different turn from Chinese Buddhism. In Tibet certain developments in Indian Buddhism (referred to as Tantric Buddhism) blended with the indigenous Tibetan tradition of Bon, which had strong magical and shamanistic elements. This resulted in the development of an interesting synthesis of magical and shamanistic practices with Buddhist worldview and epistemology. The Tibetan tradition places great emphasis on the importance of the teacher (referred to as the guru or lama), who is seen as an embodiment of the Buddha and as the gateway to enlightenment. Tibetan Buddhist cosmology is populated by a pantheon of male and female deities, who are invoked during meditation sessions that involve elaborate visualizations. Yet at the same time, these deities are seen as empty of inherent existence and as creations of the meditator's own mind.

In Tibetan Buddhism, one of the foundational meditation practices is what is referred to as guru yoga. The purpose of guru yoga is to facilitate the development of faith and devotion to one's lama. In psychoanalytic terms the Tibetan tradition attempts to cultivate an idealizing transference toward the teacher, and to use that as a vehicle for change. This transference provides an
ongoing inspiration for the student to continue on the arduous pathway of spiritual development despite its many difficulties, by helping to generate and maintain faith that change (or relief from suffering) is possible. The lama or guru serves as a living reminder that such change is possible, since he functions as an embodiment of the principles that the student aspires to realize. In addition, being in relationship with a lama who embodies special qualities helps the student feel empowered.

In the Tibetan tradition, the relationship with the lama is never interpreted as it is in psychoanalysis. From the beginning, however, the student is taught to cultivate a paradoxical attitude toward the lama, who is seen, on the one hand, as an embodiment of the highest ideals and values in the Buddhist traditions and, on the other, as a human being with human flaws and failings.

As with so much of the Tibetan tradition, guru yoga is reminiscent of the old Indian rope trick, in which the yogi climbs up a rope suspended in midair, pulls the rope up after him, and disappears. The student is taught to conjure up a world of meditation deities in his imagination, or to imbue the lama with special powers, and then to use the constructed images of his imagination in order to help him to cultivate certain attitudes toward reality. At the end of every meditation session, the meditator dissolves the image back into the nothingness from which it arose. He pulls up the rope.

Although there are many variations of guru yoga, they all involve some combination of visualization practice and prayer or incantation designed to help the student see the lama as an embodiment of the Buddha (and of the qualities a Buddha embodies) and establish a deep connection with him, thereby ultimately internalizing his qualities. For example, the meditator visualizes the lama as manifesting in the form of a Buddha or other deity surrounded by a retinue of important figures in the lineage and by various dakinis (female deities visualized in order to focus the mind). Various colors of light are then visualized as emanating from the dakinis and from the lama, bathing and purifying the meditator of self-centered craving and helping him or her to recognize all phenomena as empty of inherent existence.

This particular practice illustrates two characteristics of Tibetan Buddhist visualization practices. First, the visualization is permeated by a kind of transitional logic or reality, to use Winnicott's term. Although the visualization is intentionally constructed by the meditator, it is also treated as if it had a life of its own (you pray to the visualized lama). At the same time you explicitly
remind yourself by means of prescribed incantations that neither the visualization nor even the lama himself has any inherent existence. The meditator thus attempts to enter into a type of transitional space in the sense that the boundaries between subjective and objective reality are intentionally blurred. He or she strives to maintain a type of double vision, on the one hand knowing that the experience is subjective and, on the other, treating it as if it were objective or real.

Second, it involves the imaginary construction of a world in which the normal boundaries of personal identity become permeable. In the visualization the lama becomes identical with the Buddha, and the lama’s mind becomes inseparable from that of the meditator. This identification helps to loosen the constraints of ordinary dualistic logic and challenges the conventional self-other distinction. When the meditator conjures up an entire pantheon of lesser and greater deities and, while doing so, recognizes that they both are and are not creations of the mind, the meditator taps into a rich and vast experience that dwarfs conventional reality.

**Buddhism and the Culture of Psychoanalysis**

**Secularization and the Return of the Repressed**

The trend toward secularization in the modern world, while profoundly liberating in some respects, has also contributed to the experience of the self as empty, and in some more traditional cultures has been seen as a form of oppression and an assault on traditional ways of life. In some cases this has caused a resurgence of religious interest in a variety of different forms, a type of return of the repressed. In the middle of the twentieth century, few would have predicted that religion would once again become an important societal force. And yet, from the dramatic influence of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and internationally, to the growing influence of the Christian Right in North American politics, it is becoming increasingly clear that the trend toward secularism has dramatically reversed. As Karen Armstrong (2000) has pointed out, the rise of religious fundamentalism must be understood, not as a return to an earlier form of religious belief, but as a reaction to the spiritual and cultural crises of modernity. In its extremity and rigidity it involves a brittle and defensive attempt to revitalize a fragmented culture and to shore up a sense of self under assault.
Another response has been the emergence of New Age spirituality, which involves a syncretic blend of various traditional Eastern and Western spiritualities with pop psychology. This form of religious expression stems from a thirst for meaning and a genuine spiritual yearning. But in contrast to more mature forms of spirituality, which emphasize balancing the needs of the self with the good of the larger whole, it tends toward strong elements of narcissistic self-absorption and personal omnipotence.

We have seen how both Buddhism and psychoanalysis have struggled over time with the tension between the poles of agnosticism or atheism versus faith and commitment. Within psychoanalysis the tendency to deify Freud and to treat his words as gospel can be seen as another form of the return of the repressed.

From a contemporary psychoanalytic perspective, one of the appeals of Buddhism is the way its agnostic sensibility and its grounding in a constructivist epistemology resonate with the postmodern turn. Certainly Buddhism, like all religions, has gone through various forms of institutionalization and has often lost this agnostic sensibility. It is thus important not to idealize Buddhism, a particular danger for Westerners who have become alienated from their own spiritual traditions and seek spiritual meaning in a foreign tradition uncontaminated by negative associations. The postmodern emphasis on critiquing authority, which plays an important role in contemporary psychoanalytic dialogue, can, however, help challenge the institutionalized aspects of Buddhism that obscure its more emancipatory dimensions. Postmodern critique can help shed light on the various insidious ways in which Buddhism, like all religious traditions can be used to serve the interests of the privileged.

**Constructivism in Buddhism and Psychoanalysis**

One of the attractions of Buddhist thinking from a psychoanalytic perspective is that the constructivist epistemology that is so prominent in Buddhist philosophy is compatible with the trend toward constructivism in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking. In light of this compatibility it is interesting to think about the impulses behind this trend in the two different traditions. In psychoanalysis an important influence has been the general shift toward constructivism in philosophy and other disciplines. In addition, however, a
central impulse has been the desire to democratize the therapeutic relationship, by emphasizing the limits of the analyst’s knowledge. Related to this is the emphasis on the mutuality of the analytic relationship and the co-construction of reality by patient and analyst. These emphases are consistent with the Western tradition of democratic individualism and wariness of various forms of authority. The trend toward constructivism in psychoanalysis is also consistent with the growing emphasis on the importance of constructing healing narratives in the context of the postmodern crisis of meaninglessness.

In Buddhist constructivism, the primary thrust is to cultivate a radical sense of openness. The belief is that concepts enslave us and that the tendency toward reification creates suffering. The emphasis is not on constructing adaptive narratives but rather on the radical deconstruction of all narratives. It is interesting to note that this emphasis on radical openness is similar in some respects to the growing awareness in analytic thinking of the importance of the analyst’s openness and tolerance of ambiguity (e.g., Bion 1970; Stern 1997; Eigen 1998).

There can be a valuable complementarity between the two traditions here. Analysts, for all of their fascination with constructivist thinking, still tend to have a bias toward wanting to understand and help their patients to understand. There are times when the experience of understanding can be helpful; especially in a more individualistic culture such as ours, the construction of personal meaning (which Buddhism tends to neglect) can be very important. Yet, letting go of the need to understand can lead to the experience of awe, acceptance, and reverence in the face of the mystery of life.

**Multiple Selves and No-Self**

The Buddhist emphasis on recognizing the insubstantiality of self offers a possible antidote for the narcissistic or “empty” self-configuration characteristic of our culture. First, however, it is important to bear in mind that, just as the adoption of the view of self as multiple can reflect a counter-phobic attempt to master fears of self-fragmentation (Fairfield 2001), the adoption of the Buddhist perspective of self as empty can be an attempt to deal with one’s subjective sense of self as empty, by normalizing this state.

On the face of it, there are similarities between the Buddhist notion of no-self and contemporary psychoanalytic conceptions of self as multiple. And in
fact the growing interest of analysts in self-multiplicity may help create a climate of receptivity to the Buddhist conceptualization of the self. It is important, however, to be aware of the different functions that challenge the conventional conception of self serves in the two traditions. As we have seen, the contemporary psychoanalytic fascination with self-multiplicity appears to stem at least in part from a desire to challenge monolithic views of mental health that are implicitly conformist in nature. The emphasis in the Buddhist conception of no-self is on decreasing the sense of existential isolation, by emphasizing the constructed nature of the boundary between self and others and the interdependence of all living beings. As Francis Cook puts it, in Buddhist thinking: “There is no absolute reality beyond or distinct from this world of interdependent being. It is a place where the individual arises out of an extremely extensive environment of other individuals—parents, grandparents, culture, soil, water, stone, mist, and many, many more—and takes its place as one other individual. Once in the world, the individual is constantly and massively conditioned by the extensive environment of other individuals” (Cook 1989, 24).

It is interesting to note that in some respects this perspective parallels the object relations perspective, in which the self is constructed through the internalization of others. From an object relations perspective, however, the goal is to liberate the self by freeing oneself from one’s ties to old internal objects. From a Buddhist perspective, freedom comes from recognizing that there is no self independent of others.

There is a famous passage from Dogen, an influential thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist teacher that goes as follows:

*To study the Buddha way is to study the self*
*To study the self is to forget the self*
*To forget the self is to be authenticated by the myriad things*

Thus, when we are able to truly see the way in which we construct our experience of self, the barrier between self and other dissolves. An experience of authenticity then emerges, not out of an experience of true self as an individual, but out of an experience of being related to others as one finger of the hand is related to the others. Somewhat parallel to this perspective is Buber’s notion of the I-Thou relationship, which emphasizes that relating
to the other as a subject (rather than as an object) is associated with an experience of interconnectedness. Further dialogue between the Buddhist and psychoanalytic perspectives on the self can help to recover a mystical dimension to psychoanalysis—mystical in the sense of experiencing a sense of oneness with the cosmos. The danger with any type of spiritual solution, of course, is that it can be used defensively, as a way of avoiding dealing with emotional conflicts, or in an attempt to fill up the empty self or support a narcissistic sense of omnipotence. The Buddhist tradition, while certainly not immune to these temptations, at least attempts to counteract them in various ways. The Zen tradition in particular emphasizes the "this-worldly" or ordinary aspects of Buddhist practice and consistently focuses on undercutting spiritual escapism and poking holes in students' spiritual narcissism.

In a well-known Zen story, for example, a student asks his master, "How do I attain enlightenment?" The master asks, "Have you finished your rice?" "Yes," replies the student. "Then," responds the teacher, "wash your bowl." As this story illustrates, the emphasis is on the "ordinary magic" of immersing oneself fully in one's everyday life rather than looking for idealized or escapist solutions. In the words of the Zen poet P'ang-yun: "Miraculous power and marvelous activity—Drawing water and hewing wood" (Watts 1957, 133).

There is also an iconoclasm intrinsic to Buddhism that is consistent with some of the more recent developments in psychoanalysis that emphasize the importance of the therapist's spontaneity and personal responsiveness (e.g., Hoffman 1998; Ringstrom 2001). The Zen teachers of legend are often distinguished by their spontaneity and unconventionality and their tendency to use unexpected tactics to shock students out of their conventional ways of looking at things, in order to allow them a glimpse of enlightened or unconditioned experience. In Tibetan Buddhism there is a tradition of "crazy wisdom": certain unusual and highly respected teachers act in a way that may look odd or crazy from the perspective of conventional standards, and yet it is believed that their unconventionality, their willingness and ability to transgress conventional standards, is a mark of their enlightenment rather than a sign of psychopathology. So, for example, one of the most beloved folk heroes in Tibet was a character named Drunkpa Kunley, who was notorious for outrageous behaviors such as getting drunk and consorting with prostitutes. At the same time he
was seen as an enlightened teacher who guided (or perhaps more accurately provoked) many people to the experience of enlightenment.

Like any religion or established social institution, Buddhism has deeply conservative elements, and there has always been a tension between the more conservative and the more radical elements of Buddhism. But for all of its conservatism, there was something subversive about Buddhism from the beginning. The Buddha himself, very much aware of the limits of words and concepts, reputedly compared his teachings to a raft with which one crosses a river. Just as one leaves the raft behind after one has crossed, one recognizes that the various Buddhist teachings are only a vehicle to transport one along the path to awakening or enlightenment. To cling to these teachings as if they had some intrinsic reality would be counter to the basic thrust of Buddhism. In the Zen tradition they say, "Do not confuse the finger pointing at the moon with the moon," once again emphasizing the pragmatic nature of concepts.

The Reenchantment of the World

Premodern cultures regarded the world as an enchanted place. In these cultures the distinctions between internal and external reality and between subject and object were less clear-cut than in modern culture. The sociologist Morris Berman refers to this as "participating consciousness." As he puts it: "The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive, and human beings felt at home in this environment. The cosmos, in short, was a place of belonging. A member of this cosmos was not an alienated observer in it but a direct participant in its drama. His personal destiny was bound up with its destiny, and this relationship gave meaning to his life" (Berman 1981, 16).

In contrast, for modern consciousness the universe is a mechanistic one, operating on the basis of impersonal principles and matter that is inert and devoid of life. Human beings live outside of nature. Modern consciousness is thus fundamentally alienated. There is no ecstatic merger with nature and no sense of belonging to the cosmos.

Ernest Becker makes a similar point: "The characteristic of the modern mind is the banishment of mystery, of naive belief, of simple-minded hope.
We put the accent on the visible, the clear, the cause-and-effect relation, the logical—always the logical. We know the difference between dreams and reality, between facts and fictions, between symbols and bodies. But right away we can see that these characteristics of the modern mind are exactly those of neurosis. What typifies the neurotic is that he 'knows' his situation vis-à-vis reality. He has no doubts; there is nothing you can say to sway him, to give him hope of trust” (Becker 1973, 201).

As Hans Loewald (1980) and more recently Mitchell (2000) have pointed out, psychoanalysis has tended unwittingly to reproduce the values of a culture that experiences the world as disenchanted. By privileging secondary process over primary process, and regarding the triumph of the reality principle over the pleasure principle as the essence of mental health, it has contributed to a loss of meaningfulness.

The move toward a constructivist epistemology within psychoanalysis, however, has opened the doors for a reconsideration of the relationship between reality and fantasy. Traditionally fantasy was viewed as distorting reality, and the analytic task consisted of gaining insight into the nature of this distortion. But as Mitchell puts it in his exegesis of Loewald’s perspective: “Separating fantasy and reality is only one way to organize experience. For life to be meaningful, vital, and robust, fantasy and reality cannot be too divorced from each other. Fantasy cut adrift from reality becomes irrelevant and threatening. Reality cut adrift from fantasy becomes vapid and empty. Meaning in human experience is generated in the mutual, dialectically enriching tension between fantasy and reality; each requires the other to come alive” (Mitchell 2000, 29).

It is impossible for us to return to the worldview of our ancestors in a genuine or authentic fashion. We can reject the modern worldview, but we can never completely escape it. It inevitably colors the way we experience reality. Is it possible to achieve some degree of reenchantment of the world in which we experience a sense of participating consciousness, without an act of denial or self-deception? The Tibetan Buddhist approach to integrating practices and rituals of a more magical nature with a constructivist epistemology may provide some leads. The Tibetan culture in which such practices were originally developed was a prescientific, traditional culture in which magic and supernatural reality existed as a part of everyday experience, just as they did in Western culture prior to the Enlightenment and the dawn of the scientific era.
In this culture what was distinctive about Tibetan Buddhism was not the use of practices of a magical nature, but rather the co-option of the rituals and symbols of magic in order to pursue the Buddhist goal of realizing that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence. In contrast, in a contemporary Western context, the use of Tibetan Buddhist meditation techniques, or of practices informed by them, can have a different function. It can become a way of participating in the experience of an enchanted reality that is not normative in contemporary culture, while at the same time reminding ourselves of our own role in constructing that reality. A careful scrutiny of the processes through which such practices operate can thus play a role in refining current psychoanalytic thinking of how change can take place.

Reductionism versus Nondualism

As Becker (1973) has emphasized, one of Freud's fundamental insights had to do with the recognition of the irrevocable creatureliness of human beings. Always the iconoclast, realist, and destroyer of illusions, Freud insisted on reminding us that in the end, for all of our noble aspirations and pretensions, we are ultimately animals motivated by sexual and aggressive instincts. Many contemporary analysts are critical of this perspective and view it as reductionistic. And yet it is important to recognize the brilliance of Freud's vision in this respect and his passionate commitment to puncturing our pretensions and revealing our self-deceptions. A problem emerges when the spiritual is seen as something separate from our baser instincts. We imagine that somehow we can be free of our creatureliness, and that there is a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane. The ever present danger is that spirituality can lead to moralism rather than morality, and to dissociation and projection rather than acceptance.

From a Buddhist perspective this attempt to separate the sacred from the profane lies at the heart of the human dilemma. Rather than seeing spirituality as a derivative of baser instincts, however, the emphasis is on helping people recognize that the sacred and profane are one. In the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, for example, it is emphasized that samsara (i.e., conditioned, unenlightened existence, or the wheel of life and death) is no different from nirvana (i.e., the state of enlightenment in which all self-centered craving ceases to exist). In other words, there is no paradise or ideal state to be attained. There is only this world and this present moment, and enlightenment consists of
the experiential realization of this. The Zen tradition is notorious for its earthiness. For example, the Zen master Lin-chi said: “There is no place in Buddhism for using effort. Just be ordinary and nothing special. Relieve your bowels, pass water, put on your clothes, and eat your food. When you’re tired, go and lie down” (Watts 1957, 101).

In Tibetan Buddhism, some meditation techniques use sexual imagery as a way of expressing the non-dual nature of the relationship between the sacred and the profane. While there is something right about Freud’s insistence on seeing our highest sensibilities and accomplishments as derivatives of sexuality and aggression, there is also something off base about it. His reductionism ends up devaluing the worth of our highest achievements and aspirations rather than celebrating the beauty of human nature with all our flaws, imperfections, and self-deceptions. The Buddhist emphasis on nonduality provides a perspective that resonates with Freud’s important insights about our baser motivations, yet at the same time provides a corrective to his reductionism.

**Locating Psychoanalysis within Life**

In a laudatory review of Irwin Hoffman’s *Ritual and Spontaneity in the Psychoanalytic Process*, Donnell Stern states that Hoffman’s book is distinguished by the fact that it “locates psychoanalysis within life rather than the other way around” (2001, 464). What he is referring to here is Hoffman’s commitment to an existential perspective, which emphasizes that the ongoing struggle to create meaning in the face of mortality lies at the heart of the human dilemma. One of the reasons Hoffman’s book stands out is that with rare exceptions (most notably Otto Rank) mainstream psychoanalysts have tended to not focus on this dialectic or at least to not place it at center stage.

Traditionally, of course, these existential concerns have been at the heart of all religious systems, and it is understandable that psychoanalysts in their eagerness to distance themselves from their religious predecessors would be reluctant to tread on this territory. And yet we all know at some level that our hearts and souls are left untouched unless we are able to address our fundamental existential concerns about the meaning (or potential meaninglessness) of life in the ever-present shadow of death.

During periods of our lives when things are going well, when both we and our loved ones are healthy, we are able to quickly retreat behind a
shield of denial, and death becomes an abstraction rather than something of immediate concern. Like the protagonist in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich* before his illness, we all relate to death as something that happens to others but not to ourselves—or as something that will happen to us someday in the remote future.

Buddhism places the confrontation with death, loss, and suffering at the heart of things. And ultimately it offers refuge, not in the promise of a better afterlife or protection by a divine figure, but in the form of a pathway toward greater acceptance of life as it is, with all its pain and suffering. There are two key features of this pathway. The first is the belief that, paradoxically, the full recognition and acceptance of the impermanence of everything leads to an experience of peace and the ability to truly cherish life. Interestingly, Freud himself expressed a similar sensibility in a short paper written in the shadow of the First World War. In this article (Freud 1915), he recounts a conversation with a young poet who had expressed despondency in contemplating the transient nature of existence. Freud responds that the recognition that all we value and cherish is intrinsically transient can give rise either to despondency or to a greater appreciation of that which we cherish. The determining factor is whether we are able to fully accept this intrinsic transience and not recoil against the mourning that is linked to this acceptance.

The second principle is the recognition that we are all members of the human community, who are linked together by the bond of sharing in the pain and suffering of life. There is an old Buddhist story that captures the importance of this sense of community. A mother whose son had recently died went to the Buddha to ask him to bring him back to life. The Buddha told her that if she would bring him a mustard seed from the home of somebody who had not known loss, he would help her. As the mother went from house to house she came to realize that no such home could be found. She gradually came to feel less separated from others in her grief, and able to find peace in the midst of her pain.

Freud (1927) believed that religion coerces people into renouncing their instincts through promises of illusory salvation and threats of everlasting punishment. He believed it was important for people to have the courage to genuinely acknowledge and accept the hardships, cruelties, and indignities of life, and to relinquish the illusory comforts of religion in order for them to be able to devote their energies to creating a better life here on earth. Given
Freud's antipathy to religions of any type, there is an ironic affinity between his worldview and the Buddhist perspective on this issue. Both visions have a stoic, courageous, and uncompromising quality to them. While Freud's vision at times lapses into pessimism and cynicism, however, the Buddhist worldview is a more optimistic one. This optimism is by no means naive or straightforward. As I have elaborated at various points throughout this chapter, the Buddhist vision of what type of change is possible has a subtle and paradoxical flavor. As Ch'ing-yuan famously expressed it: “Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters” (Watts 1957, 126).

If we are going to locate psychoanalysis within life rather than the other way around, it will be necessary to take up the challenge of confronting what Hoffman (1989) refers to as the dialectic of meaning and mortality in a more sustained and systematic fashion. The dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis can play a valuable role in facilitating this process.

A Dialogue

Postmodern thinking has challenged the scientific worldview that was dominant in Freud's day. It has relativized the values of rationality and science and demonstrated the dangers of any type of master narrative—religious or scientific—that marginalizes or excludes the values of the other. Freud saw religion as an illusion. But from a postmodern perspective, Freud's faith in the scientific worldview is itself a form of religion. The dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis provides a confrontation between two divergent pathways to liberation. Contemporary psychoanalytic practice in many respects embodies the Western values of democratic individualism. On one hand, the growing emphasis on the relational nature of all human experience can be seen as a corrective to Western culture's excessive individualism. On the other hand, the growing emphasis on the mutuality of the analytic relationship and the positional nature of all knowledge is consistent with this
emphasize on the value of the individual and the challenge of traditional sources of authority. The contemporary emphasis on the construction of personal meaning and the enrichment and vitalization of the self are also consistent with those values. Liberation in this model tends to be associated with personal freedom.

The Buddhist model of liberation emphasizes freedom from self-centered craving. In this perspective the experience of the self as masterful and bounded lies at the heart of the human dilemma. In certain respects the Buddhist perspective can serve as a corrective to the excesses of Western individualism that are reflected in the psychoanalytic perspective. It can also help to recapture the missing spiritual dimension in a fashion that is in tune with a contemporary postmodern sensibility. In other respects psychoanalysis can provide an important counterpoint to certain Buddhist perspectives. The value of democratic individualism can provide a corrective to the tendency that Buddhism shares with all religions to crystallize into religious orthodoxy. Moreover, the psychoanalytic emphasis on unconscious motivation can reduce the risk of using spirituality in a defensive fashion. The dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis thus holds a potential for enriching both traditions. Through this encounter, Buddhism will inevitably be transformed, just as it was when it spread beyond India to other Asian cultures. And psychoanalysis will inevitably be transformed, just as it was when it spread beyond its culture of origin in fin-de-siècle Vienna. While it is impossible to predict what new therapeutic and spiritual forms will ultimately emerge out of the encounter, the contributions to this book provide an important glimpse of an ongoing evolutionary process.

Notes

1. Of course this is an oversimplification. It is probably more accurate to conceptualize psychoanalysis as a process through which values are negotiated by patient and analyst (e.g., Mitchell 1993; Pizer 1998). Moreover, as Lewis Aron (1999) points out, it is important to distinguish between the values of the analytic community and the values of a specific analyst. As Aron suggests, the analytic community can be conceptualized as a “third” that mediates the dyadic relationship between the patient and the analyst. It is critical for the analyst
to recognize the way in which personal and community values interpenetrate and influence one another, and to negotiate tensions between them in a reflective fashion when they emerge. Even given these qualifying factors, however, it is still important to recognize that the analytic process inevitably involves social influence.

2. I recognize that Winnicott's conceptualization of the "true self" includes a recognition that it consists of an ongoing evolving process—a "going on being"—rather than a static entity. Nevertheless, I would still argue that the popularity of this aspect of his thinking reflects a culturally entrenched sense of the importance of the individual.

3. Of course, one can argue that the goal of being liberated from one's ties to old objects is not necessarily incompatible with the goal of recognizing that there is no self independent of others. For example, W. R. D. Fairbairn would argue that freeing oneself from one's attachment to bad internal objects allows one to be open to new relationships. This is still different, however, from the experience of interdependency valued in Buddhist thinking.

References


