Contemplating a Contemporary Constructivist Buddhist Psychology

Review of *New Horizons in Buddhist Psychology: Relational Buddhism for Collaborative Practitioners*

Edited by Maurits G. T. Kwee

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We have recently seen a striking upsurge of interest in Buddhist psychology, the application of a variety of Buddhist concepts and methods in psychotherapy, and a dramatic increase in the use of Buddhist-inspired mindfulness methods in Western psychotherapies. The compatible and synergistic relationship between Buddhist and constructivist-oriented psychologies (McWilliams, 2009, 2010, in press) provides a basis for elaborating the role of constructivist, social constructionist, and postmodern psychologies in facilitating the development of a thoroughly comprehensive and authentic Western Buddhist psychology that extends beyond the adoption of specific techniques for symptom relief to embrace a broader goal of human liberation from suffering. This new volume, a sequel to a social constructionist review of Buddhist psychology practice, research, and theory (Kwee, Gergen, & Koshikawa, 1996), articulates the goal of further developing a contemporary Buddhist Psychology rooted in social constructionism, and has assembled 23 fascinating chapters that provide a solid foundation and springboard for what editor Kwee describes as “a serious mission” (p. 9) and “a Herculean task” (p. 445).

Reviewers of edited volumes often provide an overview of the volume’s intentions and discuss the individual contributions or major sections of the book. I have chosen an alternate, thematic, approach to a comprehensive overview of the volume. Twenty authors with extensive knowledge and experience in Buddhist psychology and practice contributed the book’s chapters. Due to this diversity, the chapters contain a good deal of redundancy in presenting Buddhist psychology concepts and issues. A reviewer might well regard such redundancy as a weakness of the book. However, I see it as a strength, because addressing recurrent themes and content by authors with slightly different perspectives and terminology provides the opportunity for a
clearer and deeper understanding of what a contemporary, constructivist-based Buddhist psychology might encompass and address. The recurrent themes that follow, while necessarily condensing significant information, appear in nearly every chapter in the book, and provide a foundational context and set of guidelines that could assist the evolution of a comprehensive contemporary constructivist-oriented Buddhist psychology.

The Book’s Themes

Demystifying Buddhism

Many people view Buddhism as a religion and endow it with metaphysical characteristics similar to Western religions, and, indeed, some indigenous Buddhist practices have adopted these qualities. Demonstrating how traditional Buddhist teachings actually lack these religious characteristics can help people see Buddhism as a psychology rather than a religion. Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, was a fallible, ordinary human being who rejected all ideas of theism and claimed no divinity himself. Buddhism has no deity, creator, or Supreme Being, no dogma, creed, nor beliefs that must be taken on faith; it has no one to worship, no magic, miracles, savior, or a concept of an immortal self. Buddha did not claim omniscience, instead stating the impossibility of knowing everything. The Buddha opposed irresolvable metaphysical ideas, which lead to speculation, dogmatism, and clinging to questions that have no definitive answer. He remained silent regarding indeterminate questions about the innate nature of the universe, seeing them as meaningless and irrelevant to eliminating human suffering, his primary goal.

His empirical approach addressed “this world here and now” rather than “other-worldly” issues or concern about life after death. He proposed a way of living that focused on direct personal experience and awakening through one’s own effort, rather than through belief, faith,
authority, or revelation. His approach was non-authoritarian; he directed students not to believe
what he taught, but rather to freely examine the utility of the teachings for themselves.

Focus on Human Dysfunction

Further illustrating Buddhism as a psychology, the teachings propose that the human mind creates suffering, and they include practical methods to overcome human suffering. Buddha described human dissatisfaction and suffering using the Sanskrit word *dukhha*, literally meaning “bad axle hole,” a wheel that does not align appropriately with the axle; a loose wheel leads to wobbly unsteadiness and an overly tight fit creates excess stress and tension. People experience life as unsatisfactory and frustrating because it does not correspond to what they want or expect. Suffering occurs as a human problem rooted in sensory and mental experience, not something metaphysical or imaginary. The source of the problem lies in the human thirst for pleasure, the desire to be “something,” the craving for sensory gratification and self-preservation, attachment to perceptions, reified beliefs and views, expectations, opinions, self-images, and the wish to exist forever. Attachments take the form of greed, passion or lust (what one “must” have), anger, hatred or malice (what one “must” destroy or avoid), and ignorance, delusion or false belief (not understanding the delusional nature of mental projections).

Dependent Origination, Impermanence, Emptiness

Buddhist teachings adopt an anti-foundational, process perspective, describing the phenomenal universe as in constant flux, change, and transformation; all things are impermanent and arise and pass away in dependence on other things and the interdependent conditions that support their existence. No entities exist on their own independently of the sequence of dependent origination, and phenomena lack an underlying ground of being. “Things” only arise when the appropriate conditions exist; nothing arises singly or from a single cause. The notion
of substance appears as a product of human imagination and reification of definitions and
descriptions, rather than reflecting an underlying reality. We use descriptions for convenience
and communication, not as representations of a literal entity. Phenomena have no independent
essence of their own; they are “empty” of inherent essence or substance.

No-self

Dependent origination applies to the person or self; we can identify no inner core, fixed
self, or substance that defines the person. Buddhism describes a person as composed of five
aggregates or modalities (body, sensations, perceptions, feelings, and awareness); no one
aggregate corresponds to an “I,” “me,” or “myself;” and no entity exists independently of the
modalities. Buddhist psychology views the person, the self and all phenomena as an intersection
of multiple relationships, interconnected and interdependent nodes in a web, rather than as fixed
or independently existing entities. It sees “self” as an arbitrary construct superimposed on
dependently arising psycho-physical elements, a coordinate of various impermanent factors.

Conventional language treats the self as possessing reality over time, as solid and static, and
creates identity through coherent narratives; such a designation need not imply the existence of
an actual entity. We can use the term “person” or “self” for practical purposes as long as we do
not imagine that it corresponds to a real, substantial entity.

Thoughts as Tools Rather than Representations of “Reality”

Buddhism makes a distinction between conventional (provisional) and ultimate (inherent)
reality in describing the relationship between the fundamental elements of experience and how
we view common sense objects. The five human modalities function according to dependent
origination, and operate in integrated and inseparable association. They describe the relationship
among physical stimuli, sensations, cognition and concepts, affect and actions, and awareness or
consciousness. The mind responds to this process with the experience of attraction and aversion, leading to emotional agitation and automatic and reflexive responses. Perception leads to thoughts, which proliferate, distorting experience. This proliferating cognitive tendency leads perceivers to construct sensory experiences and socially constructed ideas and beliefs about reality. Sensory contact begins a process that fabricates biased inferences leading to concepts and views of objects. The construction of self (I, myself, mine) arises from this process of conceptual proliferation. Viewing thoughts as “mine,” we treat them as real.

We can view socially constructed cognitions and concepts as useful to make sense out of phenomenal experience, as instruments that provide pragmatic value for prediction and to assist in communication. However, proliferation and reification tend to make them absolute, rigid, and regarded as representing a permanent world. Theories reflect human urges and projections. They remove the perceiver from the actual situation. Buddhist psychology proposes using these empty conventions without clinging to them, and challenges thinking at its source by making a distinction between mental content and mental behaviors or processes. It emphasizes how the mind selects content and constructs interpretations; it does not emphasize falsity of beliefs, but instead how the mind gives rise to and sustains beliefs.

**Liberation from Dysfunction**

Buddhist psychology embraces a transformational healing process that helps eliminate attachment to viewpoints, obsessions, constructions, and preferences, thus disrupting the chain of interdependent causation and mental proliferation. Mindful awareness of the arising and falling away of phenomena assists in perceiving their interdependent and impermanent nature. Liberation consists of freedom from grasping and clinging, relinquishing attachment to self by moving beyond identification with the conventional or provisional self into an experience of the
empty self, the no-self. This process develops a “good axle-hole,” a comfortable, smooth, flowing life of stability and peace of mind. Relinquishment of dogmatic, reified constructions leads to open-mindedness and a more direct experience of life, reducing distortion resulting from emotional reactions and reification of thoughts. *Nirvana* refers to cessation of greed, hatred, confusion, and the end of suffering, a positive psychological state of mind achieved in this life consisting of joy, equanimity, tranquility, oneness of mind, imperturbability, awareness, mindfulness, and serenity, rather than a mystical or metaphysical state. Transcendence of socially constructed conventions, however, does not require devaluing their utility for daily living.

**Meditation and Psychotherapy**

The comprehensive process of achieving liberation involves integrating understanding, experience, practice, and reflection, not simply the use of particular techniques, a process taking place at intellectual, somatic and biochemical levels. The process begins with recognizing a problem, comprehending the absence of permanence, grasping the possibility of attaining freedom, and employing meditation. Meditation cultivates observation of mental activity by scrutinizing the sensory, emotional, and mental modalities that originate and perpetuate intentional action. This process enables recognizing the “spark” of emotion before the “flame” of reaction occurs, observing the process of an emotional episode in the first few seconds and re-evaluating it, experiencing how a germinal state of emotion (pleasure, pain, neutral) arising in response to a sensory stimulus leads to thought, appraisal, desire, attachment, and aversion. Emotions (anger, fear, etc.) become empty products of the mind, without essence, social constructions lacking independent reality.
This integrated approach can be incorporated into a comprehensive Buddhist psychotherapy, placing mindfulness and other techniques within this broader context. Clients develop awareness of the unsatisfactory nature of their condition, cultivate a desire to relieve their suffering, investigate conditions that create their suffering, and engage in therapeutic steps to end their suffering. Meditation-based therapeutic interventions help clients actively maximize awareness of their mental processes, and more effectively handle negative feelings, thoughts, and desires, leading to greater awareness and acceptance of immediate experience and more effective choice and action.

Limitations of Mindfulness

Many authors criticized the “mindless” application “mindfulness” in psychotherapy because it excludes many important components of Buddhist psychology and. Practitioners who detach mindfulness practice from the broader context, which includes cognitive views, affective behavior, and stable mind, may misuse mindfulness by treating it as a single meta-cognitive skill. Psychotherapeutic application of mindfulness often ignores the importance of understanding and experiencing dependent arising and impermanence. It thus excludes or undermines integrated Buddhist psychology practice, which—in addition to tranquility—should include insight leading to acceptance of uncertainty, cessation of arising conditions, wisdom, and understanding. Buddhist psychology does not view mindfulness, attention, and awareness as ends in themselves, but rather as means to higher order skills, and it addresses higher goals, such as changing deeply entrenched thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Buddhist psychology has a potential for comprehensive psychological development, but is subject to distortion when attributes of the teaching are deleted. Use of individual components of meditation may attract people to serious
meditation, but focusing only on certain techniques may negate the broader aims of the Buddhist way of life and obscure other powerful elements of the tradition.

**Maintaining Buddhism’s Integrity**

Throughout Kwee’s edited book, authors raised concerns about ensuring that Buddhist psychology remains a comprehensive understanding, not an assemblage of individual techniques. They stressed maintaining connection to the original teachings as a path of liberation that emphasizes insight and wisdom, transmitted through meaningful personal experience. These teachings encompass an understanding of impermanence and conditional existence, an intentional aspiration toward overcoming unhealthy craving, a commitment to useful speech, behaving in ways that validate goals and intentions, adopting a livelihood that does not harm others, and the effective application of effort and energy guided by this view and intention toward liberation. Buddhism includes various schools of thought, but embraces a common paradigm in the life of the Buddha and the original teachings. Within this context, the authors emphasize that the teachings do not represent a final, absolute meaning, but rather provisional or conventional human constructions that can serve as a springboard for future interactions and conversation. We can view the evolution of Buddhism as an ever-evolving social construction, in constant dynamic development, while maintaining its original integrity.

**Skillful Means**

This evolving integration suggests a need to repackage the Buddhist Dharma to make it accessible to Western psychologists. Buddhism applies the term *upaya*, or skillful means, to the process of adapting the form of communicating the teachings to particular individuals and audiences, recognizing that each brings unique capacities and modes of understanding, within a particular period in time. The historical Buddha adjusted his message to the audience, time,
environment, and circumstances and used students’ ordinary, familiar, spoken language. By not clinging to linguistic convention as absolute, skillful use of communication can conform to common conventions and usages, without believing in their ultimate existence.

A Constructivist Conclusion

The book ends with a call for those with expertise in psychology and Buddhism to contribute actively to elaborating this new Buddhist psychology. What theoretical perspectives in psychology might best contribute to this process? In proposing his Relational Buddhism, Kwee states that “the only psychology that concurs with the Buddhist emptiness of ‘ultimate self’ is Social Construction” (p. 269). I agree with the value of social constructionism in viewing individuals’ functioning as emerging from relationship, and placing non-foundational emptiness within a community construction of reality. However, constructivist psychology in the broader sense, including personal and radical constructivism as well as social constructionism (Raskin, 2005), also regards “self” as a human construction (Epting & Amerikaner, 1980). Most constructivist-oriented psychologists would find the themes described above compatible: an anti-foundational, process-oriented perspective that views ideas and concepts, including “self,” as human constructions rather than fixed entities, and that applies pragmatic criterion to the utility of thoughts. Indeed, the chapters in this volume reinforce the extremely compelling synergy between constructivist and Buddhist psychologies. Constructivist psychology provides a particularly suitable and effective meta-theoretical perspective for this elaboration, and I look forward to the progress of further constructivist contributions to elaborating a contemporary Buddhist psychology.
References


