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Wedding the Personal and Impersonal in West Coast Vipassana: A Dialogical Encounter between Buddhism and Psychotherapy

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Abstract

Numerous studies have noted that depth psychology has been one of the most prevalent frameworks for the interpretation of Buddhism in the West. Similarly, many commentators have bemoaned the assimilation of Buddhist thought and practice into western psychological discourse. This paper argues, however, that such critiques often fail to adequately distinguish between reductive approaches that reduce Buddhist phenomena to psychological states, and dialogical enterprises that utilize psychology as a tool to extend, through dialogue, the aims of Buddhism. Through a focus on what I identify as "West Coast Vipassana," a distinctive current within the American Insight Community, I examine attempts to incorporate personal life into Buddhist practice. While there are numerous incidents of the reductive approach in the Buddhist-psychology interface, I interpret West Coast Vipassana as providing a more legitimate and dialogical or "skillful means" approach to Buddhist practice in a contemporary Western climate.

Jack Kornfield, former Theravadin monk and founding member of the Insight Meditation Society, opens his bestselling American Buddhist text, *A Path with Heart: A Guide through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life* by revealing that the greatest spiritual lesson he has learnt is the importance of wedding the personal to the universal. Kornfield frames this as a marriage of the universal qualities of Buddha nature with one's unique human individual incarnation. According to him, both the psychological and spiritual must be included in "the dharma of liberation" because anyone who begins Buddhist practice will soon discover that personal healing is a necessary component of the spiritual path. As such, Kornfield calls for an "embodied enlightenment" that integrates profound meditative attainment with the insights of western psychotherapy and the challenges of householder life (Kornfield, 1993: 40).

Attempts to integrate psychotherapy into Buddhism, however, have been subject to a number of critiques from both within and outside Buddhist communities. While practitioners might claim that their innovations improve traditional Asian Buddhism by making it more "psychologically astute," American religious historian Stephen Prothero declares that they have merely transformed a religion deeply suspicious of the self into a vehicle of self-absorption (Prothero, 2001). In a related vein, Theravadin monk Thanissaro Bhikkhu has criticized what he sees as a partial view of freedom offered by the psychologization of Buddhism, identifying this as a contemporary iteration of "Buddhist Romanticism." While many derive therapeutic benefit, such as a personal sense of connection and wholeness, from it, he sees it as severely limited in comparison to the full awakening available within traditional Theravadin Buddhism (Thanissaro, 2002).

The debate over the relationship between psychotherapy and Buddhism is not a new one. Numerous studies have noted that depth psychology has been one of the most prevalent frameworks for the interpretation and assimilation of Buddhism in the West. David McMahan, for example, has recently examined how psychology has served as a major shaping structure of his recently refined category of Buddhist Modernism, a historically unique form of Buddhism that has emerged as a result of a process of modernization and reform that has been taking place in Asia and the West for over a century. McMahan offers a brief history of the western psychological reconfiguration of Buddhism showing how ontological deities and cosmological realms have been translated into psychological forces and how Buddhist practices such as meditation have been rendered as psychotherapeutic techniques (McMahan, 2009: 51–59). Many commentators have bemoaned this reduction of Buddhist thought and practice into western psychological discourse. Richard Payne, for instance, decries the common assimilation of Buddhism to the Jungian narrative of individuation (Payne, 2006: 31–51).

In this paper I argue, however, that such critiques often fail to acknowledge and adequately distinguish between reductive and dialogical approaches within the broad interface between Buddhism and psychology. Whereas a reductive approach interprets and reduces religious phenomena to psychological states, a dialogical enterprise employs psychology as a tool to extend, through dialogue, the aims of religion (Parsons and Jonte-Pace, 2001: 1–29). Through a focus on what I identify as "West Coast Vipassana," a distinctive current within the broader American Insight Community, I will examine attempts to incorporate the personal self and psychodynamic and humanistic psychotherapies into impersonal Buddhist discourses and practices. While there are numerous incidents of the problematic reductive approach within the Buddhist and psychological interface, I suggest that, in the main, West Coast Vipassana attempts rather to integrate psychological perspectives within an overarching Buddhist framework and, therefore, can be more generously interpreted as providing a legitimate dialogical and "skillful means" approach to Buddhist practice in a secular western climate.

First though, it is necessary to expand more on my distinction between reductive and dialogical approaches. Here I follow William B. Parsons who has divided interactions between Buddhism and depth psychology into three main periods: 1880 to 1944, 1944 to 1970, and 1970 to 2007 (Parsons, 2009: 179–209). According to Parsons, the initial psychoanalytic encounter with Buddhism between 1880 and 1944 was severely hindered by a number of factors such as incomplete and poor translations of Buddhist texts, lack of cultural contextualization and differences, ignorance of the rich variety of Buddhist schools and practices, and lack of any first-hand contact with Buddhist teachers. In terms of its interpretative flavor, studies from this period, rooted in classical drive theory, were reductive, espoused a psychological universalism, and reflected the prejudices of orientalism and western ethnocentrism. Franz Alexander's (1923) interpretation of Buddhist meditative states as essentially inducing catatonia illustrates this classical reductive approach.

Parsons argues that three inter-related factors between 1944 and 1970 served to move the encounter into a more productive engagement. One was the development within

psychoanalysis theory of Neo-Freudians, ego psychology, self-psychology and object relations perspectives that proved to be much more sympathetic to religion and spirituality than classic drive theory. Another was the dramatic social, cultural, political and economic shifts that occurred in America during the 1960s, which resulted in a challenge to established norms of Christian religiosity and increased interest occurred in Eastern religions. During this period, Zen Buddhism emerged as a privileged conversation partner with psychoanalysis. A third factor was the gradual psychologization of Asian culture, particularly in Japan. Arguably the most influential text from this period was Erich Fromm, D.T. Suzuki, and Richard De Martino's edited collection *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* (1960), which presented an already westernized and psychologized Zen to an emerging counter-culture hungry for nondual philosophies and spiritual experience.

According to Parsons, the seeds laid down from this period have produced a more sophisticated dialogue between Buddhism and psychoanalysis during the period between 1970 and 2007. He points to numerous factors that have facilitated an increased understanding of Asian religions such as Buddhism. These include continuing waves of Asian immigration, unprecedented access to a plurality of Asian religious communities and an increased awareness of how cultural differences shape healing enterprises. Similarly, there has been the growth of departments of religion and comparative studies, significant improvements in translations, and increased scholarly specialization. Most important, Parsons claims, is the emerging social base, a therapeutically informed population that has considerable theoretical and existential knowledge of Buddhist religious philosophy and practices that is driving the dialogue. Studies from this period draw particularly from object relations (Epstein, 1995 and 1998) and intersubjectivity (Black, 2007) and display sophistication in avoiding both negative/reductive and idealistic/romantic approaches to the Buddhist-psychoanalytic encounter (Aronson 2004 and Rubin 1996). Mark Unno (2006) also introduces a needed cross-cultural sensitivity and dialogue with contributions cutting across geographical as well as disciplinary boundaries. As Parsons concludes, the emergence of a genuine dialogical approach during this period gives rise for optimism for future conversations between the two enterprises.

Additionally, I should add a short explanatory note on my term "West Coast Vipassana." I specify West Coast Vipassana because, as I will discuss, the East Coast Vipassana community centrally located in Barre, Massachusetts has been more hesitant about certain West Coast developments. Through a focus on the major base of West Coast Vipassana—namely, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, in Woodacre, California, two affiliated Spirit Rock Insight groups, and a number of key representative texts—I will evaluate some of the major thematic developments initiated by West Coast Vipassana Buddhism.¹ It should be noted, however, that while most significantly represented by Spirit Rock, West Coast Vipassana is not confined to this geographical area. Other Insight teachers such as Tara Brach, who teaches in Washington D.C, promote a similar ethos. Similarly, although a minority, there are also more conservative East Coast

¹ I will capitalize Vipassana when referring to the community to delineate it from the practice of vipassana.

aligned teachers at Spirit Rock. East and West Coast categories should be understood, then, as loose signifiers of tendencies with the Insight movement that align but do not fully coincide with the geographical locations of its two major centers.

The Emergence of West Coast Vipassana: Integrating the Personal and Impersonal

As noted, I am using the term West Coast Vipassana to distinguish a distinctive humanistic and psychologized current within the wider Insight Meditation Society. Before examining the major thematics of West Coast Vipassana, a brief consideration of its history is useful. The Insight Meditation Society (IMS) was established on May 19, 1975 in order to "provide a secluded retreat environment for the practice of meditation in the Theravada Buddhism tradition."² The four American co-founders of IMS, Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, and Jacqueline Schwartz had all recently returned to North America after spending several years in Asia being trained by Theravadin monastic and lay teachers. In January 1976, IMS acquired a mansion on seventy-five acres of rural farmland in Barre, Massachusetts. Shortly after it began to offer teacher-led intensive meditation retreats. These typically ran for ten days during which time participants' maintained complete silence and followed a daily schedule of around ten hours of sitting and walking meditation. IMS's main practice is vipassana or insight meditation. There are different forms of vipassana but IMS adopted the style of their main lineage, the Burmese tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw, who was renowned for his emphasis on intense retreat practice as the essence of Buddhism.³

In the 1980s, however, a group of IMS teachers, most notably Kornfield, James Baraz, Sylvia Boorstein, Howard Cohen, and Anna Douglas, decided they wanted to create a "wider dharma stream" that focused less on intensive retreat practice and more on issues of integrating practice with daily life. Some of these teachers were members of a Californian Vipassana sitting group, named "Insight Meditation West" (IMW) that had begun in 1974. In 1988, IMW bought 410 acres of land in Woodacre, California and began building a meditation hall and community center. It was renamed as Spirit Rock in 1996 and a residential retreat center was added to it in 1998. As James Coleman notes, although IMS and Spirit Rock share similar organizational structures, they have taken distinctively different directions. Under the leadership of Goldstein and Salzberg, IMS has remained close to the Burmese model, while Spirit Rock, strongly influenced by Kornfield, has incorporated the insights of other spiritual traditions and western psychology (Coleman, 2001: 78–79). Hence, IMS and what I identify as "East Coast Vipassana" has a reputation for being more conservative and preserving their Theravadin Buddhism lineage, and Spirit Rock and what I label "West Coast Vipassana" is seen as pioneering an integrative East-meets-West psychologized American Buddhism.

² "Insight Meditation Society.Org" www.dharma.org. [Accessed July 2 2009].

³ For a more detailed treatment of IMS see Coleman, 2001, pp. 77–80; Fronsdaal, 1998, pp. 163–180; Cadge, 2004, pp. 28–30; and "Insight Meditation Society.Org," [Accessed July 2 2009].

Kornfield frames differences between Spirit Rock and IMS as reflecting disagreements between the Burmese and Thai lineages of the American Insight Community (Kornfield, 2007). He points out that the two main teachers of these lineages, Mahasi Sayadaw and the Thai forest monk, Ajahn Chah, disagreed about the path to and nature of liberation. Mahasi's focus was on intensive retreat practice geared at profound spiritual attainment, whereas Ajahn Chah's emphasis was on non-attachment and maintaining nondual awareness in daily communal activity.⁴ By adopting the Mahasi retreat model rather than Ajahn Chah's communal living approach, Kornfield felt that the IMS had paid insufficient attention to "the integration or the embodiment of dharma outside of retreat," and it soon became clear to him and others that these issues needed to be addressed.

Spirit Rock's distinctive integrative vision is expressed in its organizational structure, general ethos, and teaching format. The responsibility for the spiritual direction of the center falls to the Spirit Rock Teaching Council. This is a collective of twenty-five lay teachers and one monastic, Ajahn Amaro. A few of the senior lay teachers have trained and been ordained in monasteries in Asia; others have received teacher training from the senior teachers at Spirit Rock. One of the most striking characteristics of the teaching council is the considerable percentage of teachers that are also practicing psychotherapists. Another noticeable feature is that many teachers declare that they are influenced by the nondual teachings of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Also, many of the teachers are married with children, a situation that has greatly influenced the general ethos and programs offered at Spirit Rock.

Spirit Rock declares that its "teachings are grounded in the essence of the Buddha's teaching in the Pali discourse," but it also significantly departs from Theravada Buddhism in drawing from a number of other spiritual and psychological traditions and offering a range of innovative and eclectic programs. One can, for example, find classes on "Sexuality as Spiritual Practice" alongside "Vipassana Meditation" and "Working with Judgments" next to "Core Buddhist Teachings." This is reflective of what Kornfield describes as Spirit Rock's embrace of "dharma diversity" and its dual commitment to preserving its Theravadin lineages and a willingness to be innovative (Kornfield, 2007). This particular mix of preservation and innovation that constitutes "West Coast Vipassana" can also be seen in contemporary teaching themes that are interwoven with more foundational Theravada teachings. While there is much overlap, I have delineated five major threads: (1) the call to include the personal self within spiritual practice and a corresponding integration of western psychology and Buddhism; (2) an emphasis on self-acceptance that is located within a wider shift towards a more feminine approach to practice; (3) the replacement of the ideal of perfect enlightenment with the goal of an "embodied enlightenment," or mature spirituality; (4) a stress on the importance of integrating meditation with everyday life and a celebration of householder life as a site for spiritual liberation; and (5) an embrace of both samsaric and nirvanic elements

⁴ See Kornfield, 1977, pp. 33–51 for a brief commentary and translation of Ajahn Chah's teachings.

within awakening.

A central thread that runs through Kornfield's popular Western Buddhist texts is the need to include and integrate the personal psychological self into Buddhist practice. Kornfield's claims that he and many of his contemporaries began Buddhist practice with the fantasy that they could transcend their painful psychodynamic history. However, addressing the personal in practice is essential because whatever meditative heights are reached, one can never fully transcend the personal self. Hence one must guard against "spiritual bypassing," the use of spiritual practice to circumvent personal developmental issues (Kornfield, 1993: 247). This point was repeated in interviews with Spirit Rock teachers; they all stressed that profound moments of awakening were inevitably followed by a return to the self. Similarly, teachers referred to students who had had deep spiritual experiences and insights but who, at the same time, were unhealthy and neurotic in their personal lives.⁵

The inability to fully transcend the personal self legitimates the incorporation of western psychology into Buddhism. Kornfield, who is also a practicing psychotherapist, has been at the forefront of the movement to integrate the two disciplines. He believes that, at their best, both psychotherapy and Buddhist meditation aim to liberate one from the power of past conditioning and the false identities constituted around such conditioning (Kornfield, 1993: 244). From this perspective, attention to the personal does not result in a reification of the self, as critics suggest, but rather expands possibilities for freedom. As he puts it, the psychological and the spiritual, the personal and the universal have become widely understood as complementary dimensions of the "dharma of liberation" (Kornfield, 1998: xxi-xxx).

Central to psychological healing is self-acceptance. Kornfield sees self-acceptance as particularly essential for western practitioners because of the pervasiveness of self-hatred in modern western culture. He laments that western practitioners often misuse Buddhist ideals to feed their punitive super-ego or "inner-critic." In a related vein, Eugene Cash, teacher of Insight San Francisco, repeatedly addresses the problem of the inner-critic in his weekly dharma talks. He claims that it is the only area of experience where simple mindfulness is not sufficient and recommends the use of either humor or intentional aggression to disidentify from it. Similarly, Howie Cohen, a founding member of Spirit Rock, constantly stresses the need for self-compassion and combines depth psychology with vipassana to suggest strategies for disarming the superego.⁶

The emphasis on self-acceptance is located within a larger shift towards a more feminine approach to Buddhist practice. According to Kornfield, Asian Buddhism has been largely a masculine and patriarchal affair. Men have had sole authority over the preservation of the tradition and have presented enlightenment as a condition to be

⁵ Interviews were between one and three hours long and were conducted in the Bay Area between May and August 2008.

⁶ Details gathered from participant-observation conducted at separate Insight weekly meditation groups led by Cash and Cohen in San Francisco during summer 2008.

attained through ascetic renunciation and self-mastery. Within American Buddhism, however, Kornfield sees a shift away from a masculinized practice that promotes renunciation, striving and conquering towards a more feminine-associated appreciation of self-acceptance, interdependence and healing.⁷ This has feminized and reconfigured the dharma as a practice of relationship to the body, the emotions, the community, and the earth (Kornfield, 1998: xxiii). As Tara Brach puts it, "We are not walking this path alone building spiritual muscles, climbing the ladder to become more perfect. Rather we are discovering the truth of our relatedness, the belonging to our bodies and emotions, to each other and to the world" (Brach, 2003: 42).

Such a perspective is described by Kornfield as an "embodied enlightenment" or a mature spirituality that abandons unrealistic fantasies such as the perfect guru or complete enlightenment. While the latter appear in Buddhist texts, Kornfield explains these as archetypal ideals and inspirational guides rather than concrete realities. Increasing freedom and a radical shift in identity is possible; however, there is no "enlightenment retirement." Mara—the personification of desire, ignorance, and aversion—always returns to visit the Buddha. Cycles of awakening and openness are followed by periods of fear and contraction. Hence, the importance of "post-enlightenment practice," in which one returns like a Zen master to the marketplace. Moreover, American practitioners wish to integrate the deepest dimensions of the dharma with their daily householder lives rather than renounce the world. In reflections such as "Daily Life as Meditation," "Moving into the World" and "Honoring Family Karma," Kornfield cautions against limiting Buddhist practice to meditation retreats and describes parenting as a "sacred act" and the home as "a wonderful temple." The embrace of the everyday, of family, work, and the world occurs within an affirmation of a wider metaphysics that celebrates both immanent and transcendent dimensions of awakening. While both immanent and transcendent paths are integral to liberation, Kornfield acknowledges West Coast Vipassana has a strong immanent flavor (Kornfield, 1993: 286–291 and Kornfield, 2000: 123–162).

The Humanistic and Psychological Dilution of the Dharma: Critiques of West Coast Vipassana

West Coast innovations have been subject to a number of criticisms on the grounds that they represent a humanistic and psychological domestication and dilution of traditional Buddhism. Initially there were tensions within the American Insight community itself with a polarization occurring between its two main centers, IMS and Spirit Rock. By the mid-1980s, growing tensions between Kornfield and Goldstein were expressed in a fairly publicized disagreement revolving around the appropriate place of

⁷ By "American Buddhism," Kornfield is referring to what Jan Nattier labeled as "import or elite Buddhism," those specific American Buddhist communities which are populated by white middle-class Americans whose main interest is in Buddhist meditation practice (Nattier, 1998: 183–195). The conflation of the term "American Buddhism" with these specific groups is problematic because, amongst other things, it ignores the fact that the majority of American Buddhists are actually Asian American Buddhists. See Pierce, 2000, pp. 277–284.

personal or psychological issues within Buddhism and the respective merits of the householder and renouncer paths (Schwartz, 1995: 307–308). Goldstein and Salzburg had become increasingly influenced by the teaching approach of one of Mahasi Sayadaw's successors, U Pandita Sayadaw. U Pandita was renowned for his strict and rigorous style, encouraging a commitment to meditation practice without "thought for body or life." Kornfield, however, reports becoming increasingly frustrated with U Pandita's "warrior approach" to practice, feeling it was not skillful for western practitioners wrestling with self-hatred. He wanted to develop a more embodied heart-centered approach that integrated meditation experiences with everyday life. Questioning whether vipassana practice alone was sufficient to resolve all areas of psychological conflict, Kornfield believed that in certain cases it was necessarily to directly engaging areas of the personality. He became convinced that the intensive individual meditation practice characteristic of the Burmese approach did not sufficiently address interpersonal issues.

In contrast, Goldstein remained committed to what he saw as the traditional Theravadin perspective of his teacher. Goldstein lamented that the highest Buddhist aim of liberation from suffering was being replaced by more humanistic concerns. In his words, "I see a tendency to let go of that goal and become satisfied with something less: doing good in the world, having more harmonious relationships, seeking a happier life. That's all beautiful but in my view it misses the essential point." Moreover, the way to liberation was through disidentification and nonattachment. Psychological work risked reinforcing a sense of self: a focus on my personal history, my individual problems. As regards adapting Buddhism for westerners, Goldstein noted that U Pandita was concerned with liberation not with making the teachings palatable for Americans. Similarly, comparing renouncer and householder paths, he quoted the Buddha's evaluation of the householder life, found within the Pali Canon, as being "full of dust." Summing up the disagreement, Goldstein stated: "the difference between me and Jack might be in his emphasis on humanistic values versus mine on the values of liberation" (Schwartz, 1995: 329–331).

Before elaborating on this tension between humanistic and Buddhist ideals and values, a few words on present relations within the Insight community are necessary. To suggest a split between IMS and Spirit Rock would be misleading. Most of the teachers move between both of the centers; some of the senior Spirit Rock teachers are or have been students of Goldstein; all teachers report strong bonds and friendships between East and West coast communities. Similarly, in my interviews with Spirit Rock teachers, interviewees reported that while IMS maintained a more traditional approach, differences between the two centers had notably lessened. This was attributed to a shift in East Coast perspectives, with two particular points being noted: first, that Goldstein has since personally benefited from and was thus more open to psychotherapy; and second, that East coast teachers had widening their perspective as a result of practicing in other Buddhist traditions, such as the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen lineage.⁸ My

⁸ See Joseph Goldstein's book *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism* (2001), in which he explores the different views of Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism on the nature of enlightenment. Also, later interviews with Goldstein show a shift in his perspective regarding

general impression from formal interviews and casual conversations is that teachers are keen to portray the Insight community as diverse yet harmonious.⁹

Another critique of the American humanistic infiltration of Buddhism has come from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, a prolific contemporary monk and translator of Pali texts. Thanissaro convincingly argues that many American Buddhist themes—such as wholeness, integration, interconnectedness, opening the heart and ego-transcendence—are reflective not of Buddhism but of Romanticism and its contemporary heir, depth psychology. He correctly notes that Romanticism was one of the major western filters for Buddhism and that the Romantic view of religious life has shaped the western view of dharma practice. Three Romantic concepts have been particularly influential in the American assimilation of Buddhism. First is Friedrich Schiller's concept of integration as an unending process that is personal and unique for each individual. Second is the translation of Schiller's model of integration through the figures of William James, Carl Jung, and Abraham Maslow into the psychological perspective that a final end to suffering is both unattainable and undesirable. Third is the Romantic imperative to creatively recast traditional religious doctrine to keep religious experience alive for each generation that has also influenced liberal Christianity and Reform Judaism.

Thanissaro calls on American Buddhists to interrogate Romantic assumptions and become aware of the real differences between the two traditions. In particular, he draws attention to fundamental differences between Buddhist and Romantic notions of the nature of religious experience, the basic spiritual illness or problem and the possibility and nature of spiritual cure. Like Goldstein, Thanissaro unfavorably compares the full awakening offered by Theravada Buddhism to the partial view of freedom offered by "Buddhist Romanticism." For him, in emphasizing interconnectedness rather than the unconditional freedom of nirvana, it excludes those aspects of the dharma that address levels of suffering remaining even after the attainment of personal wholeness. It also alienates those people who find the concerns and the cure it offers too facile. Furthermore, in its concern to accommodate American middle-class comfort standards, Buddhist Romanticism has abandoned the fundamental Theravadin ideal of renunciation (Thanissaro 2002).

the possibilities of householder life as a site for liberation. See Andrew Cohen (2000) "There's No Escape from the World: An Interview with Joseph Goldstein."

⁹ While the gap between IMS and Spirit Rock has lessened, however, disagreements still remain. One teacher at Spirit Rock claimed that East Coasters remained suspicious of the heavily psychologized accent of their West coast counterparts. Another teacher at IMS told me that many within the East Coast community felt that Kornfield had unintentionally done American Buddhists a disservice in promoting what some feel is a diluted version of Buddhism in his bestselling texts.

Beyond Reductionism: Towards a Dialogical Encounter Between Buddhism and Psychotherapy

Critics have accused West Coast developments, therefore, of reflecting a dilution and corruption of Buddhism by western Romantic, humanistic and psychological values. The influence of these western discourses on American Buddhism is undisputable. As McMahan notes, it has often been said as a matter of course that modern forms of Buddhism have been westernized, Romanticized, Protestantized or psychologized (McMahan, 2008, 8). What I wish to problematize, however, is the equally common move that equates acknowledging these influences with immediately dismissing them. For, as McMahan states, while Buddhist Modernism is neither unambiguously "there" in classical Buddhist texts and lived traditions nor is it merely a fantasy of an educated white western elite population. It is rather a new historically unique form of Buddhism that has emerged as a result of a process of modernization, westernization, reinterpretation, and reform that has been taking place not only in the West but also in Asian countries for over a century. This new form of Buddhism has been fashioned by modernizing Asian Buddhists and westerners deeply engaged in creating a Buddhist response to the dominant problems and questions of modernity (McMahan, 2008: 5). It is this novel and historically unique form of Buddhism, what one of my informants enthused as "the Buddhism of the future," that has taken root at Spirit Rock. Such novelty is not, McMahan rightly stresses, grounds for an automatic dismissal. Yet, as he also recognizes, the hybrid nature of Buddhist modernism inevitably raises questions of authenticity and legitimacy. At what point, McMahan asks, does Buddhism become so thoroughly modernized and westernized, that it simply can no longer be considered Buddhism? Rejecting the myth of a pure original Buddhism to which every adaptation must conform, he points out that very extant form of Buddhism has been shaped and reconfigured by the great diversity of cultural and historical circumstances it has inhabited in its long existence.

In the absence of a pure Buddhism with which to compare and measure contemporary developments against, how are we to respond to these questions of authenticity and legitimation? McMahan suggests that to ask if any of the various forms of Buddhist modernism are legitimate is to ask whether there are communities of practice that have been convinced of their legitimacy (McMahan, 253–254). Following McMahan, I wish to make a case for the legitimacy of the integration of western psychodynamic and humanistic psychotherapies into Buddhism on the same and related pragmatic and ethical grounds that are forwarded by the communities within which they are occurring.

As noted, numerous commentators have lamented the invasion of western psychology into Buddhist discourses. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, for example, have targeted what they see as the corruption of Asian religious ideals by western individualistic and psychological values. According to them, the slow assimilation of the religious into the psychological has distilled the social and political aspects of religion to form a privatized religion amenable to the demands of neoliberal ideology. They claim that psychologized spirituality privatizes and commodifies Asian wisdom traditions,

reducing them to techniques aimed solely at the production of individual enlightenment. Asian religious perspectives are repackaged to suit and enhance the modern psychological subject. Rather than leading to the transcendence or deconstruction of the self, Asian teachings are used to pursue a divine individualism. Carrette and King locate this psychological dilution within the long and shameful history of the European colonialist appropriation of Asian culture (Carrette and King, 2005: 52–124). McMahan raises similar concerns when he notes that there are certain fragments of Buddhism that have been so completely absorbed into western consumerist culture that they are reduced to commodities marketed merely to reproduce its profit driven aims:

This is where Buddhism fades into vague New Age spiritualities, self-help therapies, and purely personal paths of self-improvement. While there may indeed be personal benefits to such approaches, they are largely subservient to popular values and often merely instrumental to their ends: making money, working effectively at the office, having a rich and satisfying private life. (McMahan, 2008, 261)

In bemoaning the invasion of western psychology within Asian religions, Carrette and King and McMahan join a long chorus of dissent at what is claimed as the corruption of authentic Asian religious traditions by western Romantic, humanistic and individualistic values (Prothero 1996 and Versluis 1993).

It is undisputable that modern western concerns with the individual personal self have been a constant feature of the western encounter with and appropriation of Buddhism. However, while having clear historic precedents, contemporary attempts to incorporate the personal self differ from their predecessors. To begin with the wider dialogical context between western psychology and Asian religions has markedly improved. As I noted earlier, Parsons has traced a number of important socio-cultural shifts and intellectual developments that have significantly transformed encounters between psychotherapy and Buddhism. Amongst scholastic developments are a number of ethno-sociological studies and cultural psychological studies have concluded that Asian models of subjectivity differ from western ones in being more collectively orientated and less concerned with individuality (Mines, 1994: 279–295 & Roland, 1998). Noting this, Buddhist scholar-practitioners such as Anne Klein have acknowledged that American Buddhists encounter unprecedented concerns because the modern western construction of the self as a unique individual is foreign to traditional Asian cultures (Klein, 1995). Janet Gyatso's presentation of the Tibetan visionary Jigme Lingpa's autobiography tempers claims that a sense of personal individuality is a unique marker of modern western identity (Gyatso, 1998). I remain convinced, however, that the modern psychological subject, whose appearance was influentially documented by Philip Rieff, is not sufficiently addressed by traditional Asian Buddhisms (Rieff, 1966).

One indication that traditional Asian Buddhist practices do not address the modern psychological subject are reports that vipassana practice alone is not able to resolve the personal material uncovered for practitioners on intensive retreats. Kornfield, for example, reports that at least half of the western students on the annual three-month

retreats at IMS are unable to continue with vipassana practice because they encounter so many unresolved emotional and psychological issues (Kornfield, 2003: 246). This confirmed the earlier findings of Insight teacher and psychologist Jack Engler (Engler, 2006: 17–30). Engler and Dan Brown did a Rorschach study of vipassana meditators before and after a three-month retreat. They found that about half of the practitioners were unable to sustain vipassana practice because they became overwhelmed by unresolved developmental conflicts. As Engler explains, "Trying to get them to redirect their attention to note simple arising and passing of phenomena is usually unsuccessful. The press of personal issues is just too great" (Engler, 2006: 23–24).

Another indication consists of accounts by Asian teachers, such as Mahasi Sayadaw and the current Dalai Lama who confess to being bewildered at the psychological problems they encounter in their western students. On his first visit to America, Sayadaw confessed that many students seemed to be suffering from problems that were unfamiliar to him. Before leaving the US, Sayadaw shared that he had discovered a new form of dukkha, called "psychological suffering" (Engler, 2006: 24). Similarly, the Dalai Lama was astonished to hear that many westerners suffer from self-hatred and pointed out that there was no equivalent Tibetan word or concept for this psychological issue (Kornfield, 2003: 245).

As Engler recognizes, freedom from these personal issues cannot be achieved simply by prescribing more meditation or other forms of Buddhist practice. This he believes is particularly true for issues concerning trust and intimacy in relationships: "These issues cannot be resolved simply by watching the moment-to moment flow of thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the mind. These problems arise in relationships; they have to be healed in relationships" (Engler, 2006: 23).

Engler's observation leads to my next argument that charges of psychologization and individualism fail to fully appreciate the relational dimensions of many of the innovations of West Coast Vipassana. Many innovations have been motivated by the realization that Buddhist practice often proves insufficient in addressing interpersonal dynamics for western practitioners. This insight has emerged through the experiences of individual lay practitioners in their romantic, family, and working relationships and when crises in spiritual communities reveal the replication of dysfunctional family relational patterns. Kornfield's personal reminiscence captures what has emerged as a common narrative amongst many western Buddhist practitioners:

Although I had arrived back from the monastery clear, spacious, and high, in short order I discovered, through my relationship, in the communal household where I lived, and in my graduate work, that my meditation had helped me very little with my human relationships. I was still emotionally immature, acting out the same painful patterns of blame and fear, acceptance and rejection that I had before my Buddhist training; only the horror was that I was beginning to see these patterns more clearly now...The roots of my unhappiness in relationships had not been examined. I had very few skills for dealing with my feelings or engaging on an emotional level or for living wisely with my friends or loved ones (Kornfield, 2003: 6–7).

Similarly, in the wake of the now well-documented "fall of the western guru," the series of sexual, drug, and financial scandals which rocked a number of North American Buddhist communities in the 1980s, many communities came to recognize that unconscious psychological dynamics, such as transference issues and unresolved narcissistic needs, had contributed to the ethical crises that erupted around the guru-disciple relationship (Butler, 1991: 137–147, Rubin, 1996: 83–97).

In order to address the neglect of the interpersonal, certain western Buddhist teachers have developed different relational practices derived from Buddhist practices and principles but incorporating the insights of western psychotherapy. Gregory Kramer's practice of insight dialogue serves as a perfect example. Kramer, who trained with Theravada monastics in Asia and is a visiting teacher at Spirit Rock and IMS, developed insight dialogues after discovering that individual meditation practice was not sufficiently attending to the suffering generated through interpersonal dynamics. He claims that even in those Buddhist traditions in which community life is a central transformative practice, meditation itself is entirely internal and largely ignores interpersonal dimensions. To rectify this, he developed the practice of insight dialogues or interpersonal meditation that directly applies vipassana to the relational realm. Kramer sees insight dialogue as completing that aspect of the Buddhist path, the interpersonal, that has been historically neglected. While it is grounded in Theravada Buddhism, it utilizes psychotherapeutic insights and is particularly relevant to the needs of contemporary western practitioners (Kramer, 2007).

In summary, then, over the last forty years many westerners have been participating not just as serious students but also as teachers across the Buddhist traditions. Labeled by Parsons as "cultural insiders," these individuals constitute a new cadre of participants, a significant number of whom are familiar professionally with depth psychology and have first-hand experiential knowledge of the different maps of subjectivity that Buddhism has produced. The increasing plethora of contemporary narratives to which such social actors give voice share several related themes. First, they articulate a more pragmatic evaluation of the scope of Buddhist contemplative practice. Central to this evaluation is their acknowledgement that psychodynamic issues are not necessarily addressed and, in fact, might even be aggravated by Buddhist practices. That acknowledgement comes with the coining of a new term "spiritual bypassing" to denote how meditative experiences or Buddhist meditative practices or philosophy can be misused to circumvent personal developmental issues. Second, such narratives evince more nuanced understanding of how cultural differences, particularly in subjectivity, affect practice. Third, they recognize a common need for western practitioners to supplement spiritual work with psychotherapy. Finally, they call for a mature approach to spiritual practice that puts the personal and the spiritual, the immanent, and transcendent into a dialogue (Kornfield, 2000, 2003, 2008; Tarrant, 1998; Welwood, 2002; Preece, 2006; Aronson, 2006; Magid, 2008).

Considering such attempts to integrate the psychological self into Buddhism as reflecting a genuine ethical and pragmatic response to the above issues, I am skeptical of critiques that dismiss such moves as the mere reduction of Buddhism to western psychological perspectives. Granted, there are many streams, such as classical Jungian

positions, within the encounter between western depth psychology and Asian religions that problematically reduce the latter to psychological narratives. The alternative, more dialogical, maneuvers that I am highlighting here, however, attempt rather to integrate psychological and spiritual perspectives within an overarching Buddhist framework. In evaluating West Coast Vipassana attempts to integrate personal life into Buddhism, the question, therefore, becomes whether personal material is negotiated in a way that reduces Buddhism to psychology or extends, through dialogue, the Buddhist aim of freedom from suffering. Although there are certainly places in which West Coast teachings problematically conflate Buddhist and psychological discourses, in light of the above evidence, I claim that its attempts to integrate the (inter)personal self into Buddhist practice should be discriminated, in the main, as dialogical enterprises.

Conclusion: Incorporating the Personal as Skillful Means

The influence of psychology on Buddhist Modernism is undisputable. In evaluating the contemporary interface of Buddhism and psychotherapy, however, it is useful to distinguish between reductive and dialogical accounts. Rather than dismiss West Coast developments as dilutions of traditional Theravadin Buddhism, therefore, I suggest a sympathetic reading of them as attempts to develop a more "skillful means" approach to Buddhist practice in the West. As Kornfield puts it,

I simply feel that in order to be skillful at this time, the dharma has to include attention to personal life and the kind of emotional deficiencies that are common in our society. It has to bring skillful means of awareness and compassion to those areas, which aren't—and weren't—major focuses in the monasteries in Asia (Tworkov, 2000: 37–45).

West coast teachers see their innovations, therefore, not as replacing but as building upon the foundations of Theravada Buddhism in order to make it more accessible for western practitioners. They reject the framing of the debate in either/or terms: psychology or spirituality, the personal or universal, humanism or liberation. For them, it is a case of both/and, with traditional forms of Buddhism being expanded upon rather than rejected. In order to qualify as skillful means, West Coast Vipassana must strive to maintain a both/and dialogue and honor their dual commitment to preservation and innovation. One way this can be achieved is through maintaining grounding in Buddhist tradition through the study of the Pali Cannon and through nurturing links with monastic communities. It is also important to resist conflating Buddhism and depth psychology, as is characteristic of earlier problematic reductive approaches, as this not only ignores significant, irreducible differences between the two distinct discourses, but also limits the potential of each to illuminate and respond to limitations in the other. Finally, it is necessary to make innovations transparent. Here I agree with Gil Fronsda, a member of the teachers' council at Spirit Rock, who has called on Vipassana teachers to study traditional Buddhism, not in order to adopt it wholesale but to be more conscious about what is and is not adopted and to take more responsibility for assumptions and intentions underlying innovation (Fronsda, 2002). Recent developments at Spirit Rock are promising in these respects. It has initiated a

number of programs designed to ground practitioners in core and advanced Buddhist teaching, including intensive study of the Pali suttas, and Kornfield's penultimate book (2008) is notably centered in the Theravada Buddhist psychology found in the Abhidhamma. This suggests that having successfully implemented more innovative aspects, West Coast teachers are renewing their attention to foundational elements of Theravada Buddhism.

Such trends are consistent with McMahan's observation that within contemporary Buddhist Modernism there has been a reclaiming of tradition and the appearance of various combinations of tradition and innovation alongside the existence of an increasingly detraditionalized Buddhism. As he notes, these conditions are more characteristic of late or post-modernity than modernity (McMahan, 2009: 246). Applying this broader shift to the Buddhist-psychology interface, one might reasonably predict that the area will continue to witness the emergence of genuine dialogical enterprises (Aronson, 2006, 61–85 and Magid, 2008) as well as the proliferation of the reductive approaches more characteristic of early Buddhist Modernism.

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