

Research Article

The Buddhism and Psychology Discourse: A Hermeneutic

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A primary conceptual framework for Buddhism in contemporary popular religious culture is as a kind of psychology. This representation dates from the nineteenth century, when apologists took advantage of the new cultural discourse of psychology to explain Buddhism in ways that made it accessible, familiar, acceptable, and more easily incorporated into modern, religious consumerism. This essay is a hermeneutic examination of this psychologizing discourse. It describes three forms of that discourse, identified here as “interpretation of,” where Buddhism is seen in psychological terms, “interpretation as,” where Buddhism becomes a form of psychology, and “interpretation,” where the interpretive act is erased and Buddhism and psychology become unproblematically identical.

Keywords: interpretation; psychology; hermeneutics; C.G. Jung; Alan Watts; Rob Preece; Robert Wright; psychopathologizing

Introduction: Pounding Round Pegs into Square Holes

The interpretation of Buddhist praxis (doctrine + practice) in relation to psychology takes place within a wider conceptual framework of three cultural categories. Three broad rubrics—religion, philosophy, and psychology—have been the frameworks into which Buddhism has been appropriated. First contacts placed Buddhism in the framework of religion.¹ The rise of the apologetics of Buddhist modernism in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, increasingly moved the discussion of Buddhism into the frameworks of philosophy and psychology.² The motivations leading individual scholars to make this change of framework were, no doubt, complex. As we know from our own era, scholars often find it appealing to try out different and new systems of thought for their own area of specialization. At the same time, apologetic motivations also

¹ Although there is information about Buddhism in ancient and medieval Western sources, these seem to be more in the way of anecdotal materials. By “first contacts” I am referring here to the initial sustained interactions between Westerners and Buddhists. See de Lubac, 2000, and Lenoir, 1999.

² Taking Edwin Arnold’s 1879 *Light of Asia* as a convenient mark for an apologetic based on congruence between Buddhist and Western values.



contribute to framing unfamiliar traditions in terms of more familiar conceptual systems. This essay focuses on the conceptual system of psychology (understood broadly to include psychotherapy), nascent a hundred years ago.

In the case of C.A.F. Rhys Davids' early and influential work, the unfamiliar subject was the categories of mental activity discussed in the *Nikāyas* and *Abhidhamma*, and the favored conceptual system was psychology. Rhys Davids herself notes that a “religious” view of Buddhism as “just a certain ethical reform movement, a gospel set on foot to save souls and roll back the murk of sin and superstition, a new creed with a revived moral code,” only provides a narrow view of Buddhism (Rhys-Davids 1914: 1). For her, a psychological inquiry, although also not comprehensive, includes an extensive range of material, “from [Buddhism’s] earliest recorded expressions in the Suttanta, or books of Suttas, again in the analytical works known as Abhidhamma-Pitaka, and other early surviving books, down to the discursive commentaries of the present era, the work of eminent scholastics” (Rhys-Davids 1914: 3–4).

Rhys-Davids favored psychology, but all three categories—religion, philosophy, and psychology—have their own intellectual history in the West, and bring with them deeply entrenched sets of presumptions. They are not, in other words, neutral abstract categories of thought. When Buddhism is discussed within any of these three frameworks, the presumptions entailed by the conceptual frameworks themselves structure what Buddhism can say, what it can contribute to the discussion. Constrained by a specific framework, Buddhism can only speak to the conceptual elements, the organizing categories, and the intellectual concerns already structuring the discourse, these contributing to the creation of such semiotically marked categories as “Buddhist theology” (Payne 2012–2013). Thus, at the outset, it is important to say that, having its own developmental history and therefore its own concepts, categories, and concerns, Buddhism is not religion, not philosophy, and not psychology.³

There are, of course, aspects of Buddhist thought and practice that are analogous to each of these three ways of thinking. This is hardly surprising, given that Buddhism has a history of over two and a half millennia, has spread across the Indic and Sinitic cultural zones, has been translated into a dozen or more languages, and has a canon comprising thousands of texts. Even these three

³ Michael von Brück is representative of many others who attempt to resolve this problem in the opposite fashion. He asserts a plurality of identities for Buddhism, rather than denying any possible analogous identity. Brück claims that Buddhism can be understood as five things: a science (*Wissenschaft*) of psychic processes and factors, a philosophy, a religion, a practical system of meditation, and a way of life (von Brück, 2007: 18). Making the representation of Buddhism more complex in this fashion has its value, and as such is a worthwhile approach. What it seems to risk, however, is simply chopping Buddhism into smaller chunks, each of which is then itself forced into a different conceptual framework. Doing so would not avoid the tendency to interpret Buddhism in response to preconceptions, but only increase the variety of preconceptions being read onto Buddhism. There is an additional potential difficulty with this approach, which is that the explication of connections may be made more difficult. It is, for example, inherently difficult to reveal the connection between Buddhist epistemological conceptions categorized as philosophy and ritualized visualization categorized as meditation practice. By setting Buddhism outside the various familiar conceptual frameworks, I hope to avoid the latter problems of explicating relations between frameworks, while at the same time hopefully reducing the former set of problems, those of imposing intellectual presumptions from any particular conceptual framework.

analogues—of religion, philosophy, and psychology—would constitute too narrow a view of the whole of Buddhist thought, since there are also Buddhist analogues of anatomy, physiology, embryology, astronomy, chemistry, grammar, logic, aesthetics, and so on.

This essay examines the interpretive strategies that support the pervasive tendency in contemporary American popular religious culture to understand Buddhism psychologically.⁴ Modern popular religious culture is based on psychological, therapeutic, and metaphysical presumptions, themselves operating within the larger—and largely invisible—neoliberal ideology of consumerist individuality. In that context, the differences between Buddhism and popular religious culture are suppressed (Payne 2016).

In this article, I propose that there are three chief interpretive strategies by which Buddhism has been integrated into modern popular religious culture. I identify these as “interpretation of,” “interpretation as,” and “~~interpretation~~.” First, “interpretation of” refers to the interpretation of Buddhism from the perspective of psychology, and in doing so takes psychology as its standpoint from which to understand Buddhism. Next, “interpretation as” refers to the interpretation of Buddhism as a kind of psychology. In this comparativist project, best practice requires examining both similarities and differences. Last, “~~interpretation~~” refers to those representations of Buddhism in which the interpretive method is either completely suppressed, i.e., made invisible, or is in fact absent—in which case “Buddhism” then functions as little more than exotic robes draped over a pre-existing psychologized worldview. Here “Buddhism” becomes an empty signifier, though one with cultural cachet. In ~~interpretation~~ all that remains of Buddhism is a psychologized brand of teaching available in the consumerist, therapeutic, religious culture of contemporary society. At the point of ~~interpretation~~, not only has the interpretive process been made invisible, but any aspects of Buddhism that are not amenable to being represented as psychology are erased, marginalized, or trivialized (e.g., dismissed as cultural accretions clinging to and obscuring the psychological and therapeutic essence of Buddhism). Although specialists in Buddhist studies are themselves usually distant from the representations of Buddhism found in popular religious culture, those representations often go unquestioned in other scholarly literatures. This article seeks to increase awareness of the interpretive nature of those representations in the broader scholarly community.

Although it might be appealing to attribute this psychologizing appropriation of Buddhism to a malevolent Orientalism, the situation is more complex. While there certainly is a kind of cultural imperialism at work, there is also a positive moral imperative that drives much of the interpretive project. The moral imperative for psychologizing foreign religions appears to be a sense of a shared humanity and a commitment to creative dialogical exchange.⁵ Scholars and proponents informed by the liberal values of the Enlightenment tend to be unwilling to simply reject the beliefs and practices of the cultural Other. The moral vision of a shared humanity grows uncomfortable with dismissing the beliefs and practices of others as irrational, primitive, irrelevant, or the work of demons (a claim

⁴ There have been other popular interpretations of Buddhism over the last three quarters of a century, including aesthetic and counter-cultural. My thanks to Franz Metcalf for calling this qualification to my attention.

⁵ My thanks to Ann Gleig for sensitizing me to this aspect of contemporary Buddhism.

which has been given new life in the discourse of “spiritual warfare” [Harrington 2012]). Beyond the mere assertion of the value of shared humanity, however, two additional claims are sometimes made to support that assertion—but both are problematic. First, the claim that religion is a social praxis found among all human groups. Second, the even more problematic claim that all religions are somehow ultimately the same (Payne 2008).

Locating the Other’s religion within a single unifying, unified, and familiar discursive realm of understanding, psychologizing makes the foreign and perhaps otherwise incomprehensible more easily accessible. Psychological therapeutics then acts as a metanarrative overarching all religions, a realm in which all traditions are equal as expressions of universal psychological factors, and everyone is equal as a psychological being. Treating foreign religions as psychological therapeutics has the added benefit that it also provides a way of harmonizing conflicting religious claims of ultimacy. All such conflicts can be interpreted away as complementary alternatives—alternatives that are equally commodifiable and equally accessible.

This psychologizing is an ongoing process with many dimensions, and those different dimensions have been explored in several important works. I examine selected instances here in order to understand the alternative theoretical locations which have structured the field to date.

Previous Studies of Buddhism and Psychology

This section discusses selected surveys of the field of psychology/psychotherapy and Buddhism.⁶

Franz Metcalf (2002) provides an overview of the interaction between Buddhist practice and psychotherapy, from Freud and Jung to the turn of the 21st century, outlining two major trends: “The Americanization and Psychologization of Buddhism,” and “The Buddhicization of Psychology,” and closes with a discussion of the role of Buddhist studies scholars. He emphasizes that the “*assumptions* of those working in the intersection of Buddhism and psychology have, over time, become *fact* as they have influenced the two fields” (349). Metcalf has described how some teachers employ psychotherapeutic techniques as part of meditation training (356). While this is the case in the field, the convergence of meditation and psychotherapy blurs the distinction between meditation teacher and psychotherapist, and may underestimate the dangers of dual relations—that is, having the same person as both one’s psychotherapist and meditation teacher.

Ann Gleig has also noted the integration of psychotherapeutic and meditation orientations. She describes the approach taken by Josh Korda as involving a “relational turn,” which she explains as “a more context-sensitive approach to individual meditation practice and an increasing interest in developing relational and communal dimensions of Buddhist practice” (2016: 2). While modernist representations of Buddhist practice have moved away from monastic models to ones of individual, isolated meditators (Mitchell 2014), practices (such as Korda’s) that emphasize social and communal dimensions of Buddhist life, provide an important counterbalance. They also contribute to more

⁶ Note: not primary instances. That work has already been done and is to be found in the excellent annotated bibliography of the topic by William S. Waldron (2016).

refined nuancing of translation terminology, such as distinguishing the attachments implied in the terms *upādāna* and *mitta* (11–12).

Much of the rhetoric in the convergence of Buddhism and psychotherapy involves redefining Buddhist practice solely as a means of relieving suffering (Mitchell 2014: 84). This allows for practitioners to treat Buddhist and psychotherapeutic practices as equivalents (Ciarrochi 2006). A more nuanced metaphor employed in presenting this kind of perspective is border regions, where two different sets of practices can engage with one another (Brazier 2000).

Here we are aided by Ira Helderman's interdisciplinary work in psychology and religion. The primary theoretical issue of Helderman's work is how psychotherapists conceptualize the relation between religious and "not-religious," specifically in the context of negotiating the distinction between psychotherapy and Buddhist practice (Helderman 2019: 14). Helderman examines a variety of ways in which Buddhist and psychotherapeutic practices have interacted, including treating religion as a kind of therapy (55), appropriation of techniques (83), translating Buddhist techniques into a psychotherapeutic form (116), psychotherapists employing Buddhist techniques in their own lives with consequent influence on their practice (151), open adoption of Buddhist practices (178), and integration of the two into a unified practice (210). While Helderman's focus is on the ways in which psychotherapists engage Buddhism along the religious v. secular frontier, much of what he discusses parallels the hermeneutic approach taken here along the Buddhist v. psychological frontier. One might parse the many practitioners he documents, using the schema this article proposes.

Again, this article is not intended as a comprehensive survey of the project of psychologizing Buddhism. It is not about the relation between Buddhist and psychotherapeutic practice, nor about how psychotherapists employing Buddhist practices negotiate the religious/secular divide. It is not a historical study *per se*, though it examines historical instances. It instead focuses on explicating different interpretive modes, suggesting a taxonomy by which different interpretive projects can be contextualized.

Psychology, Therapeutics and Metaphysics

For almost a century and a half, the culture of modern Western society has been assimilating Buddhism. In the late nineteenth century, the processes of modernization created social tensions that played a critical role in the formation of psychology, and of a psychologized Buddhism. Franz Metcalf has discussed this process, explaining that all

the various forms of modern psychology grew up in response to the waning of the sense of *Gemeinschaft* and the breaking up of the religious identity of the modern person. . . . When we view psychology in the light of its historical rise, we see that despite its early institutional place in opposition to religion, the religious impulse remains close to its heart. It was only a matter of time before the commonalities of psychology and Buddhism captured the attention of practitioners of both (Metcalf 2002: 350).

The culture assimilating Buddhism is characterized by three dimensions relevant to the creation of a psychologized version of Buddhism—the psychological, therapeutic, and metaphysical.

Psychologizing the Self

By “psychological” I mean that modern consciousness is conceptualized as interiority, that is, the modern self is identified with interior psychic processes. The interiorization of the self has a long history, but it is in the modern era that it has become the dominant modality for self-conception.⁷

The modern psychological self is conceived of as more than simply an interior agent, however. First, that interior agency is seen as primary, the source of action and decision, and for this reason carries ethical responsibility. While some scholars attribute the creation of this interiorized self as it exists in Western society to Augustine, more proximately the ethically primary self derives (not uniquely, but still influentially) from Kant. Symbolically at least, we can attribute the second dimension—that which converts the interior self as primary agent into the psychological self—to Freud. This is the conception of the self as subject to unconscious interior impediments, the panoply of neuroses, psychoses, character disorders, and so on. Indeed, in some philosophically idealistic conceptions, all of the impediments of human existence are seen as psychological, that is, a person’s suffering is attributed to their emotional evaluation of events, and happiness is the consequence of deciding to be happy.

Therapeutics

For Buddhism in the contemporary world the question of how religion came to be defined in terms of personal well-being is not an abstract historical inquiry. It is central to how the goal of Buddhist practice—no matter how variously identified: *nirvāṇa*, *satori*, *gedatsu*, awakening, enlightenment, or birth in *Sukhāvātī*—is understood. The deepest and most profound effect of popular religious culture with its therapeutic presumptions has been the psychological interpretation of Buddhism as a means of attaining personal well-being.

“Therapeutic culture” refers to the modern conception of the self as fundamentally flawed in some way, together with the promise that this flaw can be corrected. It is perhaps the single most important source of motivation employed by consumerist society; one in which attaining personal happiness and well-being occurs through the consumption of goods.⁸ As classically defined,

⁷ Throughout this paper I will be using the term “self.” A common, but superficial, reading of Buddhism claims that it teaches that there is no such thing. Such a reading is frequently found in the literature in which Buddhism is psychologized. The confusion here, however, is in the psychological presumptions of modern Western culture—the presumption that when the term self is used in Buddhist English it simply means the sense of personal identity, which in modernity has been internalized as a psychological phenomenon. But when Buddhism refers to *attā*, which is what is translated as the self, it is not referring to this internal psychological sense of personal identity. It is referring specifically and precisely to a set of metaphysical characteristics that are mistakenly attributed not only to persons, but also to things. What is being identified in the Buddhist denial of *attā* (i.e., *anattā*) is the failure to recognize that all existents are best understood in terms of “*Anicca* (impermanent), *aññathatatta* (alteration), *khaya* (waning away), *vaya* (dissolution), *nirodha* (cessation)” (Karunadasa 2019: 283). This is a metaphysical claim, not a psychological claim. It is *not* the denial that selves exist, but rather the denial that they are permanent, eternal, unchanging, or absolute. Thus, it is perfectly coherent for Buddhism to speak of the self, that is “a human agent, a person” (Taylor 1989: 3).

⁸ A consumerist society is one in which membership is defined by consumption. As an undergraduate in a college philosophy class on social theory (Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* was the text for the course), I argued that Marxist

consumerism was focused on the consumption of material goods (and hence the common but misleading use of the term “materialistic”⁹). Today, however, consumption is of virtual commodities as well: experiences. Buddhism is commodified not only into books and audio recordings, but also into weekend workshops, podcasts, online courses, and audiences with masters as experiential commodities.¹⁰ In this process, therapeutic culture employs a variety of rhetorical strategies to motivate consumption, whether of deodorant, psychotherapy, dinner at McDonalds, or an online meditation training program.

A variation on this theme is the modern construction of the self as deficient (as “lacking” in David Loy’s terminology, Loy 2002), as needing completion or fulfillment. The sense of self as needing to be fixed constitutes the therapeutic culture. While we might distinguish between self-help and other-help modalities in the therapeutic, both are mediated by—and therefore implicitly reinforce—neoliberal consumerist conceptions of the self as somehow flawed or deficient.

Perhaps the most obvious forms of this are in advertising, which creates a need in order to stimulate purchase of a product designed to fill that need. This aspect of a psychologized Buddhism is evident in the frequently encountered promotions of Buddhism as providing “happiness.”¹¹ The steps may be analyzed as:

1. everyone, of course, wants to be happy
2. no doubt you are not as happy as you would like to be
3. therefore, buy this book, take this workshop, receive this initiation, etc.

This dynamic—creating a need and then filling it—is widely characteristic of religious traditions. What may be unique about present popular religious culture is that often what is identified as a need to be filled is defined in psychological or emotional terms: happiness, peace-of-mind, well-being, and so on. This is evident, for example, in the marketing of mindfulness as a panacea, as discussed by Jeff Wilson (Wilson 2014).

The Metaphysical Tradition in America

Along with the psychological and therapeutic character of American popular culture, we also need to consider the character of the religious culture with which Buddhism has most interacted in the US. Buddhist thought has been transformed by being interpreted within the preconceived framework of presumptions (concepts, categories, and concerns) forming the Western psycho-spiritual tradition, what Catherine Albanese calls the “American metaphysical religion” (Albanese 2007).

theory was mistaken in asserting that people were exploited in their role as workers. It seemed to me, even at the end of the 1960s, that people were exploited more as consumers. Unfortunately, the instructor was not impressed.

⁹ “Materialistic” as a synonym for acquisitive has come to be conflated with metaphysical materialism, which is an ontological theory. This has led to the allegation that acquisitive materialism is caused by modern science, i.e., the metaphysical materialism of some scientific theories. The resulting confusion is vast and deep, and far beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Part of the credit for this assertion goes to Chögyam Trungpa’s *Spiritual Materialism*, which very clearly describes this dimension of Westernized Buddhism.

¹¹ Entering “Buddhism happiness” into a web browser search engine yielded 616,000 hits in 0.18 seconds. Monday, March 10, 2008.

Albanese has proposed that there are “three major forms of religiosity whose interplay and, in many cases, amalgamations have worked their way through the nation’s history” (Albanese 2007: 4–5). Albanese refers to these three as evangelical, liturgical, and metaphysical. A metaphysical religiosity “turns on an individual’s experience of ‘mind,’ which distinguishes this mode from the evangelical emphasis on the ‘heart’” and from the liturgical emphasis on community (Albanese 2007: 6).

All three of these forms of religiosity found in American religious culture have formed templates for Buddhism in the U.S. Early forms of Nichiren Shōshū of America/Soka Gakkai can be seen as an amalgamation of the evangelical and metaphysical. The role of testimonials was, if not a direct appropriation of the long-standing American Revivalist tradition of testifying to the work of the Lord in one’s life, then at least it was deeply influenced by that practice.¹² And, indeed, NSA/SG seems to have been largely oriented to the same classes of society that evangelical religions have appealed to. The Buddhist Churches of America, and other immigrant Buddhist churches that purposely adopted American church styles exemplify the liturgical form of religiosity in which participation in communal ceremonial action is central.¹³ Although often placed in a separate category from these “church-like” forms, many meditation groups effectively operate in the liturgical mode as well—the collective ceremonial action being practicing meditation together.

Many other strains of Buddhism in the US have employed the template of metaphysical religiosity, however, and the discourse of Buddhism and psychology has been informed by this religious template. Albanese explains that

Metaphysical forms of religion have privileged the mind in forms that include reason but move beyond it to intuition, clairvoyance, and its relatives such as “revelation” and “higher guidance.” . . . For metaphysicians, religious change may happen either suddenly or gradually, and practice arises organically out of these beliefs of correspondence, resemblance, and connection (Albanese 2007: 6).

While the integration of Buddhist praxis and psychology does not evidence every aspect or detail of Albanese’s description of metaphysical religiosity, these beliefs do constitute a kind of landscape upon which the discourse of Buddhism and psychology has taken place. Conceptual landscapes are usually taken for granted, and not being noticed, are not recognized for their role in forming a discourse. Metaphysical religiosity constitutes the largely implicit presumptions guiding the discourse into well-worn cultural tracks. Wakoh Shannon Hickey has fruitfully employed Albanese’s analysis in her own examination of the historical continuity running from nineteenth century systems of “mind cure” to the Mindfulness Movement of the present (Hickey 2019).

Many presentations of Buddhism highlight the primacy of the mind, a rhetorical move reflecting the presumptions of metaphysical religion. These then dialectically promote a selective

¹² This judgment is based on personal observations of Nichiren Shōshū practices in the late 60s in the area around San José State University.

¹³ The disjunction between these different types of religiosity may also help to explain why these different forms of Buddhism in the US so often “talk past each other.”

representation of Buddhism. Discussions of Buddhism and psychology, or representations of Buddhism generally, commonly exhibit the opening two stanzas of the *Dhammapada* as evidencing the primacy of mind in Buddhist thought.¹⁴ When deployed in a psychologizing context, this text can be understood to promote a metaphysical view. However, the selection of that text is already an interpretive act, and a different view of Buddhism would follow, for example, from selecting texts that emphasize all three doorways of action (Pali, *dvārattaya*; Sanskrit, *tridvāra*)—body, speech, and mind (Heim 2014: 41).

The Three Modes of Interpretation

Having outlined the psychological, therapeutic, and metaphysical characteristics of the religious culture into which Buddhism has been integrated, we can now turn our attention more specifically to the article’s promised schema. We find each of the three different hermeneutic modes—interpretation of, interpretation as, and ~~interpretation~~—throughout the literature on Buddhism and psychology. This article cannot provide a comprehensive treatment of all instances, instead it highlights some exemplary representatives of each mode.

Interpretation Of: Symptoms and Symbols

The writings of Carl Jung (1875–1961), and Franz Alexander (1891–1964) include interpretations of Buddhism in psychological terms. After summarizing these well-known views, we look at the ethnographic work of Fokke Sierksma (1917–1977) whose interpretations of Tibetan Buddhism apply Freudian theories and offer a particularly trenchant example of “interpretation of.”

Jung

Today, if one’s concern is understanding Buddhism, then Jung’s interpretations of Buddhist thought and practice are highly problematic (Clarke 1994: 122). Given the advances in the field of Buddhist studies over the last century, however, this should be hardly surprising. These interpretations continue to be of interest, however, as expositions of his psychological theories in interpretive interaction with Buddhism.

Perhaps Jung’s most widely influential and enduring contribution to the discourse on Buddhism and psychology is his interpretation of the mandala as a psycho-cosmic image. He abstracted the mandala from the religio-aesthetic praxis of South, Central and East Asia, relocating it into a theory regarding the processes of psychic integration. In understanding the mandala this way, Jung focused on it as symbolizing orderliness (symmetry), as part of a wider range of what

¹⁴ The selection of the *Dhammapada*, and particularly its opening two stanzas, to exemplify Buddhism is also no doubt motivated by the ingrained habit of thinking that every religion necessarily has a single authoritative text comparable to the Bible, but also by metaphysical presumptions. There are several other texts that have the same kind of summative, pedagogic, and mnemonic function, such as, the “Book of the Way to the Other Shore,” the *Therīgāthā* and *Theraḡāthā*, and the *Udānavarga*, to name just a few. An important study would be what led to the selection of the *Dhammapada* as a primary representative of Buddhism in the West over the course of the last two centuries.

should more properly be called “mandaloid” diagrams, and as exemplifying his theory of individuation. Jung’s psychological interpretation of the mandala is thus congruent with his psychological interpretation of buddhas and bodhisattvas as anthropomorphic symbols of psychic potentialities of the practitioner, as for example discussed below in relation to Preece’s treatment of the *dharmakāya* and *sambhogakāya*.

Alexander

Franz Alexander and his essay “Buddhistic Training as an Artificial Catatonia: The Biological Meaning of Psychic Occurrences” (1961 [1933]) is discussed in detail by Ira Helderman (2019: 58–62). Alexander’s interpretation of Buddhist practice is both reductionistic and pathologizing, in keeping with the preconceptions and cultural values inherent in Freudian theory.

Basing his interpretation on the work of Friedrich Heller (1922) on the four *jhānas*, Alexander claims that “actual mental absorption” results from “a systematic suppression of all emotional life” (77). In Alexander’s psychoanalytic frame, this is a narcissistic condition in which pleasure is “completely freed from the genitals,” and is the “condition which we ascribe to the schizophrenic in his catatonic ecstasy” (78). He further asserts that the “end goal of Buddhistic absorption is an attempt at psychological and physical regression to the condition of intra-uterine life” (81). In other words, rather than contributing to the healthy development of a person, Buddhist practice is an attempt to return to the womb. This interpretation is consistent with the Freudian framework within which Alexander operated, a framework he shares with Fokke Sierksma.

Sierksma

Fokke Sierksma’s *Tibet’s Terrifying Deities* is a relatively early work on Tibetan tantric Buddhism, the subtitle of which evidences Sierksma’s approach: *Sex and Aggression in Religious Acculturation*. Here Sierksma asserts that “the aim of [Tibetan] culture was and is to cancel man and society as visible realities” (Sierksma 1966: 18). This representation (or caricature) of Buddhism seems to have more of its basis in Schopenhauer’s philosophy (which claims Buddhism as an authoritative support of Schopenhauer’s own pessimistic worldview) than in Buddhism itself. In Sierksma’s treatment this nihilism becomes the essential character of Buddhism and makes Buddhism an exception from all the world’s other religions. He sees this putatively unique character of Buddhism as the particular source of the cultural tensions of Tibetan religious culture: “unlike most other religions it did not regulate or sanction natural inclinations and institutions, but—in its later forms also—took up a stand against them on principle” (Sierksma 1966: 21).

Sierksma begins his study of Tibetan Buddhism by focusing on the New Year festival, giving particular attention to the reversal of social order that takes place during these celebrations. His approach is to treat this instance of a ritual of reversal, a category of ritual seemingly found in all religious traditions, as symptomatic of the psychic problems produced by what he describes as the

imposition of a world-denying religious culture, that of Buddhist India, onto the culture of Tibet.¹⁵ In a more specific example of his interpretive approach, Sierksma discusses the figure of Hevajra, drawing on Snellgrove's translation of the *Hevajra tantra*. Sierksma claims that

Mysticism seeks permanent liberation from the self, Hevajra uses sex and aggressivity for the unbounded inflation of his self. . . . While the Buddha taught that affective ties with the phenomenal world must be cut, to become free of the illusion of the self, the voluptuous enjoyment of power and sex alternate here, making the ties with the world as thick as cables in magic of mystic pretension, and inflating the ego till it becomes the Lord of Creation himself (Sierksma 1966: 59–60).

Despite their different orientations, Jung, Alexander, and Sierksma provide examples of interpretations of Buddhism from a psychological standpoint. Jung is a sympathetic (though reductionistic) interpreter, while Alexander is pathologizing, and Sierksma communicates a sense of distanced and perhaps hostile disparagement. While their attitudes differ, they are all engaged in projects of “intepretation of.”

Interpretation As

Alan Watts (1915–1973) was a formative figure for the neo-Romantic surge of interest in Buddhism in the 1960s and 70s. His interpretations of Buddhism—and Hinduism and Yoga—were central to counter-cultural discussions at the time and contributed particularly to the interpretation of Buddhism as psychology.

In contrast to Jung's claim that “the East” only produced speculative philosophy or metaphysics, but lacked the critical acumen to produce psychology, Watts opens his 1961 work *Psychotherapy East and West* with the claim that

If we look deeply into such ways of life as Buddhism and Taoism, Vedanta and Yoga, we do not find either philosophy or religion as these are understood in the West. We find something more nearly resembling psychotherapy (Watts 1961: 3).

Watts goes on to explain that “psychotherapy and the ways of liberation have two interests in common: first, the transformation of consciousness, of the inner feeling of one's own existence; and second, the release of the individual from forms of conditioning imposed upon him by social institutions” (Watts 1961: 13).¹⁶ By speaking collectively of Buddhism, Daoism, Vedanta and Yoga, Watts was employing a Perennialist understanding of religion in which all religions are “ultimately”

¹⁵ An analogy might make the problematic and highly speculative character of this more evident. By the same logic, Halloween is a ritual of reversal that demonstrates a lingering cultural expression of the psychic problems produced by the imposition of the world-denying culture of early Christianity onto the society of northern Europe.

¹⁶ Note here one of the common threads of the therapeutic culture identified by Micki McGee, that is the emphasis on liberation from social conditioning. See, for example, the discussion of “co-dependency” in McGee 2005: 89. These threads argue for the perduring quality of classical Cynicism in Western culture.

the same, though one more nuanced than is commonly found in New Age and metaphysical streams of popular American religious culture.¹⁷

According to Watts, a characteristic common to the four traditions he discusses is that they all are in opposition to their natal social orders, and by implication, therefore, stand in the same location outside social order. This resonates with the popular image of the religious teacher as Romantic hero, whose quest outward gains a spiritual treasure that the teacher brings back to benefit others (Campbell 1949, Tumminia 2016: 350). More explicitly, however, Watts deploys an image that has been continuous in Western religious culture from the Greek Cynics—that society is what constrains the individual who must seek autonomy and freedom outside society, or even in opposition to society.

Watts' explicit statement of his own position makes this an "interpretation as." He asserts that "liberation from the *maya* of social institutions and not of the physical world...is simply a hypothesis which, to me, makes far better sense of Buddhism and Vedanta, Yoga and Taoism, than any other interpretation" (Watts 1961: 48). Later, however, by dismissing counter-evidence, Watts implicitly argues that his interpretation is, not simply better, but correct. He does this despite having to claim there are teachers in these traditions who themselves do not fully realize the way in which their own traditions are actually effective in liberating one from social conditioning: "Admittedly there may be many *gurus* who do not fully realize that this is what they are doing, just as there are many physicians who do not realize that some of their medications are placebos" (Watts 1961: 57). Watts is claiming to know what the tradition *really is* and to therefore to be able to evaluate the adequacy of different teachers' understandings depending on the standard that he himself has identified.

Like Jung, Watts' standing as an authority for the study of Buddhism has largely faded. He was, however, influential in the formation of the understanding of Buddhism in American popular religious culture in the second half of the twentieth century. For example, he propagated his understanding of Buddhism through broadcasts on the Berkeley radio station, KPFA. Along with Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, and Gary Snyder, he was a member of the "Houseboat Summit," named for having taken place on his Sausalito houseboat.¹⁸ This helped to establish the cultural connection between the end of the Beat era, the beginning of the Hippies, the use of psychedelics, and Buddhism (Osto 2016: 28). Watts' views of Buddhism "as" psychological substantially influenced the understanding of Buddhism in popular religious culture.

¹⁷ The problem with the kind of Perennialism that Watts presents in *Psychotherapy East and West* is that while it may be true that all of the systems that he discusses—Buddhism, Daoism, Vedanta, and Yoga—can be interpreted as being in opposition to their dominant social orders, this does not mean that they all stand outside all social order, nor does it mean that they all stand in the same place. It is this latter, specifically, that gives his interpretation a Perennialist quality. First, they each do have their own social system, which is, in fact, largely drawn from the dominant society. While this might frequently be alleged to be a decay from original, pure, individualistic teaching into institutionalization and routinization, such an interpretation is largely a projection of Protestant historiography. Second, rather than all winding up in the same place, because each system is oppositional, they form a pair-bond with the specific social system they oppose. Sociologically, this oppositional status makes them sects.

¹⁸ The transcript was published in the *San Francisco Oracle*, issue number 7. My thanks to James Robson, Todd Perreira, and Erik C. Braun for assistance tracking this down.

Interpretation

When teachings, doctrines, ideas, concepts, and terms are presented as *only* psychological, then we have ~~interpretation~~—where the interpretive process is no longer explicit, having been placed under erasure. By making the interpretive effort invisible, interpretation is presented as incontrovertible, simply the way things are.

Preece: Buddhism as Metaphysical Religion

An instance of ~~interpretation~~ is Rob Preece's *The Psychology of Buddhist Tantra*. On the face of it, Preece's juxtaposition of tantra and Jungian psychotherapy would seem to provide an opportunity for a straightforward explanatory project. But instead of explaining any psychological theories promoted within tantra, he presents Buddhist tantra as equivalent to psychotherapy, the interpretive act being made invisible by the assertion of equivalence. Several ideas that are part of popular religious culture in the US facilitate this, being widely accepted in the culture and giving the equivalencies asserted by Preece the patina of being naturally true. These ideas include New Age idealism, "energy," and reframing cosmology as psychology.

Preece participates in the philosophical idealism characteristic of the Metaphysical Tradition of American religion as described by Albanese. For example, Preece claims that "in Buddhism our mind is seen as the primary creator of the reality we experience, and we can change it only by changing our inner world" (Preece 2006: 62).¹⁹ While this claim is factually false as a general claim about Buddhism, it appears to be uncontroversial to those whose religiosity is primarily metaphysical. The belief in the power of the mind—both to create illness (or in contemporary terms, stress) and to cure—is deeply rooted in American popular religious culture (Harrington 2008, Hickey 2019, Haller 2012). Although its roots are deep in Western religious culture, in American popular religious culture it can be traced back to the Transcendentalists (early nineteenth century), through New Thought, Christian Science, and Theosophy (Albanese 2007: 286–287; also, Hickey 2019: 18–62).

Preece also employs another idea rooted in American popular religious culture: "energy."²⁰ While there are correlates to energy in Buddhist thought (such as *rlung* [wind] in Tibetan medicine, *prana* [breath] in yogic traditions, and *qi* or *ki* [referring originally to the steam rising from cooking rice] in East Asian contexts [see Samuel and Johnston, eds. 2013; Gyatso 2015]), there seems to be no explicit interpretive dynamic equating these concepts with energy as used in the psychologizing rhetoric.

Use of the term energy in the psychologizing of Buddhism seems to draw more on common usage in popular Western religious culture, as in "being aligned with spirit" (Albanese 2007: 15; see

¹⁹ Unfortunately, he does not give any source for this claim.

²⁰ It seems that often when people use the language of "energy" they are using it to describe some personal, subjective experience. Describing his own experiences in retreat, for example, Preece says "For a while I found the intensity of energy almost intolerable, but by remaining within the clearly defined retreat boundaries, and giving the energy a vehicle for its transformation in the meditation practice, the intensity eventually began to subside" (Preece 2006: 67). There is, of course, nothing objectionable about someone using whatever terminology they like to describe their own experience.

also, Hickey 2019: 91–94). Animal magnetism, energy, and similar appropriations of (quasi-)scientific concepts allowed those whose religious faith had begun to fade at the end of the nineteenth century a way of maintaining a kind of religiosity without being tied to doctrines and institutions increasingly seen as dubious (McMahan 2004; cf. Hickey 2019: 100–104). Today, the language of energy seems to have become a permanent fixture of popular religious culture, carrying a quasi-scientific tone, and displacing older, more explicitly religious terms, such as “spirit.”

Preece psychologizes the concept of the three bodies of the buddha (the *trikāya*), in particular the *dharmakāya* and the *sambhogakāya*. He makes an equivalence between these and aspects of the personal psyche in the course of a discussion of a key practice of Buddhist tantra, deity yoga. Preece explains deity yoga as referring to psychological structures and processes, saying

Dharmakaya, our primordial clear-light mind, . . . is the essential nature of all archetypal forms that emerge in the domain of sambhogakaya as the pure energy of creative vision. Sambhogakaya, known as “the body of pure bliss,” the “complete enjoyment body,” or the “illusory body,” is the realm of our fundamental vitality that has the capacity for luminous creative vision. Sambhogakaya is also described as the “purified emotional body,” and is therefore at the root of our qualities of feeling (Preece 2006: 48–49).

Here, suddenly (from the perspective of the history of Buddhist thought) we find the *dharmakāya* and *sambhogakāya* of the buddha being explained as aspects of the psyche. What had been one part of a threefold ontology of the buddha as body of the teachings (also body of what actually exists), the existence of various buddhas as glorious deities (such as those encountered through meditative visualization practices), and buddhas as awakened human beings (such as Śākyamuni), Preece asserts are dimensions of individual psyches. Such an interpretive approach presumes contemporary psychology and psychotherapy—in Preece’s case, Jungian—as its basis. It treats the psyche as having a specific structure: collective unconscious, Self, personal unconscious, and so on, and the bodies of the Buddha as referring to those structural elements.

Preece’s ~~interpretation~~ includes identification of Jungian archetypes with tantric deities. This allows a universalizing of the deities of Tibetan tradition as expressions of an archetypal form, a relationship of manifestation in which the archetype is the actually existing reality of which any manifestation, including a tantric deity, is an ensymbolment. Archetypes exist in and of themselves and can only be known indirectly, in some specific expression, such as the image of a deity.²¹ This is similar to the way Preece equates *dharmakāya* and *sambhogakāya* with aspects of a person’s psyche. In both cases, Preece takes Jungian psychology as simply true and explains Buddhist concepts in terms of that system. If, instead, we step back from both (bracketing the assumption of truth regarding either one), then Preece’s putative explanations appear instead as ~~interpretations~~.

²¹ Preece’s expression suggests ideas about the death of gods who go unworshipped, such as Pan. This is a theme explored in Romantic poetry such as Oscar Wilde’s “Pan,” and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Dead Pan.”

Wright: Interpretation by Subtraction

At the beginning of Robert Wright's *Why Buddhism is True*, the author unapologetically selects Buddhist Modernism as what he means by Buddhism. Without any particular justification other than his personal preference, his definition of Buddhism specifically excludes any of the

“supernatural” or more exotically metaphysical parts of Buddhism—reincarnation, for example—but rather [is] about the naturalistic parts: ideas that fall squarely within modern psychology and philosophy (Wright 2017: xi).

Wright goes on to make a second rhetorical move that converts what he has selected as falling “squarely within modern psychology and philosophy” into the essence of all forms of Buddhism. He claims that by subtracting those parts of Buddhism that do not fit with a modern, naturalistic worldview, he is at the same time focusing

on a kind of “common core”—fundamental ideas that are found across the major Buddhist traditions, even if they get different degrees of emphasis, and may assume somewhat different form, in different traditions (Wright 2017: xi).

Here we see a rhetorical strategy frequently encountered in the contemporary secularizing discourse about Buddhism—selecting parts of Buddhism that one likes, and then claiming that just those bits are what are important (or true, or essential, or original, or authentic). Not uncommonly, the latter claim takes the form of asserting that it is just those parts that are the true and authentic teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha, and, therefore, privileged as authoritative. In this case, however, Wright takes recourse to claiming that the version of Buddhism he has constructed constitutes the essence of the whole of Buddhism: its “common core.”

Having reduced Buddhism to only that which is congruent with modern psychology and philosophy, Wright then chooses to avoid what he calls the “super-fine-grained parts of Buddhist psychology and philosophy,” specifically, for example, the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. By avoiding the Abhidhamma teachings, Wright has ruled out any counterevidence, such as the teachings on rebirth and momentariness (Karunadasa 2019: 171, 285), from one of the primary sources of actual Buddhist psychology. This is in other words a *petitio principii* fallacy—rather than exploring the psychological ideas propounded in Buddhist praxis itself—he is free to discuss a version of Buddhism that is little more than modern psychology dressed in Buddhist robes, in other words, *interpretation*. By simply subtracting out the messy bits—rebirth, momentariness, pure lands, buddhas who glow in multicolored lights, siddhas who remain in concentration for twelve years while their dinner goes bad—Buddhism is reduced to a very comfortable form of only those decontextualized parts that agree with evolutionary psychology.

In the same fashion that Preece naturalizes Jungian theory, Wright takes evolutionary psychology as simply how human consciousness is to be understood. For example, he asserts that feelings are evolutionarily inherent. Wright characterizes different feelings in response to different situations as having provided some evolutionary advantage—either survival or reproduction. As with so many arguments based on evolution, this has the danger of devolving into *ex post facto* “just-so”

stories (e.g., we feel jealousy because such a response improves the likelihood of reproducing [Wright 2017: 96–97]). His next step, then, is to claim that this aligns with the Buddhist analysis of feelings as “delusional.” In his evolutionary story, the feelings once worked, but are now outdated, no longer effective—what worked on the savannah of Africa doesn’t work in the skyscrapers of modern cities (Wright 2017: 33). Wright takes evolutionary psychology as given; whatever matches it in Buddhism makes Buddhism “true.”

As happens frequently in such cases, there is no grounding in the actual Buddhist analysis of feeling. Having already waved away the Abhidhamma, Wright doesn’t identify which category of Buddhist analysis of consciousness he is referring to by “feeling”—whether, for example, he means *vedanā*, which has only three valences, or another of the more complex evaluative members of the list of *skandhas*, or some other category entirely. But since he is not interpreting Buddhism, but rather ~~interpreting~~ it, such specificity is not only unnecessary, but undesirable, as it would make the interpretive character of his project evident.

Indeed, much of Wright’s analysis would seem to be largely reducible to the old, and non-Buddhist, dichotomizing of emotion and reason, with the moral imperative of employing reason to control emotion.²² Wright describes what he calls “a core paradox of Buddhist meditation practice: accepting that your self isn’t in control, and may in some sense not even exist, can put your self—or something like it—in control” (Wright 2017: 93).

Wright’s efforts evidence a widespread problem found throughout the project of psychologizing Buddhist thought. Because a psychological perspective is taken for granted, *ātman* and its negation, *anātman*, are understood to be referring to the psychological self rather than to a metaphysical essence that is eternal, absolute, permanent, and unchanging—and also, as found in the teachings of the early canon, a source of satisfaction and pleasure (*sukha*). Wright decontextualizes *ātman/anātman*, and instead assumes the self being talked about is the psychological self.

Having evaded inquiry into the intellectual contexts of Buddhist thought, or into Abhidhamma, Yogācāra, or *tathāgatagarbha* thought, Wright instead appeals to “common sense” as if the widely shared beliefs of our own time represent the thinking of those living on the Indian subcontinent more than two millennia ago.

[T]o provide the fullest explanation, we’d need to delve into ideas about the self that were circulating in his [i.e., Śākyamuni’s] day. But certainly, leaving his intellectual context aside, there’s a kind of commonsense appeal to his argument: We do tend to think of the self—the inner, real me—as something enduring, something that persists even as we grow from children to adults to senior citizens (Wright 2017: 93).

To be clear, Wright’s ~~interpretation~~ suggests it is not necessary to make any effort to understand what either the early canon or later teachings say about the working of the mind, but adequate simply accept our own “commonsense” view and call it Buddhism.

²² The pattern of dichotomizing reason and emotion, along with privileging reason as controlling emotion, is indeed a very longstanding part of Western culture. An influential instance, for example, is Plato’s chariot metaphor in the *Phaedrus* (246a–254a).

Epstein and the Body Eclectic

One of the pervasive characteristics of much of popular Buddhism is an untheorized and naturalized Perennialism. When theorized, the rhetoric of Perennialism is that the truth (one might write “Truth”) is one, that all religions are in quest of this one and unitary truth, and that within any religion there are mystical teachings more adequately expressing that truth. Perennialist literature widely employs the metaphor that, just as many paths converge as they ascend to the top of a mountain, the higher teachings of different traditions converge into a single, universal form.

The most common form that Perennialism takes in popular religious culture, however, is the practice of drawing on a variety of different religious sources without discriminating between them. Perennialism presumes that they all speak to a universal human condition, and, even in the absence of any contextualizing explication, it is possible for us to understand their meaning. Thus, it is not uncommon for popular Buddhist teachers to draw stories from Rumi or Gandhi or the *Dao De Jing*, without feeling any need to justify doing so (despite Rumi’s speaking of mystical union with Allah, while Buddhist thinkers dismiss such experiences as not conducive to awakening).

This soft Perennialism characterizes Mark Epstein’s venture into psychologizing tantra. He gives his *Open to Desire* the subtitle *The Truth of What the Buddha Taught*, indicating an intent—at least rhetorical—to provide accurate information about the Buddha’s teachings. While he structures the book around the four noble truths, Epstein presents the goal as “wholeness” (Epstein 2006: 17). “Wholeness” produces a positive affect because it functions as an empty signifier within which any number of different and even conflicting meanings can be accommodated without being reconciled. It also implicates a range of anti-modern rhetoric, as it contrasts with the frequent trope equating modernity with fragmentation of the person. The capaciousness of “wholeness” and an unreflective Perennialism enable Epstein to employ the story of Rama and Sita from the Hindu *Ramayana*, as commentary on the four noble truths. Similarly, Epstein juxtaposes personal anecdotes about conversations with Ram Dass to Zen stories. Perennialism serves as the grand theory floating above modernist interpretations of religion as a general category, including Buddhism as a specific example.

The purpose of *Open to Desire* is the reclamation of desire as a positive value, again reminiscent of the positive valuation of the erotic in neo-Romantic thought. It is here that *Open to Desire* appropriates tantra. Though the term tantra is only used sparingly in the text, Epstein quotes the Dalai Lama to support the work’s argument regarding the beneficial value of desire:

In the early Buddhist traditions, desire was viewed as a poison to be avoided. The later Mahayana view was not to avoid the poison, but to antidote it with the appropriate remedy. In *Tantra*, desire is seen as a potent energy to be used on the path to enlightenment; just as peacocks in the jungle thrive on poisonous plants and transform them symbolically into the radiant plumage of their tail feathers (Epstein 2006: 50).²³

²³ Quoted from Baker 2000: 51. I was unable to track down Baker’s source.

While the term tantra makes little appearance in the work, the notion of “the left-handed path,” which is closely tied to tantra in popular religious discourse, is employed more frequently, for example in the title of the second chapter.

Epstein consistently uses the idea of “the left-handed path” in the Perennialist style. He refers to “the Buddhist left-handed path” (Epstein 2006: 119), though that terminology is not used in Buddhist discourse (either generally or in relation to Buddhist tantra).²⁴ No clear definition of “left-handed path” is given by Epstein, much less any historical grounding. It serves as a general-purpose term for whatever he wishes to associate with a positive valuation of desire.

In at least one case, Epstein’s usage seems to refer to something like “lighten up” in the sense of not being obsessive about the small stuff. Epstein describes what he calls “classical meditation,” by which he appears to mean mindfulness or *vipassanā*, as employing “moment-to-moment microscopic observation of thoughts and feelings . . .” But, “while classical meditation focuses on the micro level, the left-handed path dwells on the macro” (Epstein 2006: 96). This assertion remains frustratingly unsupported, though it does allow Epstein to claim that in service to the macro-perspective of the left-hand path, “psychotherapy can be an invaluable resource, since its observational field, unlike classical meditation, is the world of human relationship” (Epstein 2006: 96).

We will close with something much more specific, though no less problematic. In discussing the story of Kāśyapa smiling when the Buddha holds up a flower, Epstein offers his own explanation, focusing on the sexual symbolism of flowers. Although introducing this explanation with an admission that it is idiosyncratic, he asserts that “the Buddha’s decision to hold up a flower could very easily have had a not-so-secret meaning” (Epstein 2006: 37)—though a meaning nobody in the tradition seems to have known until Epstein’s quasi-Freudian insights. In concluding a string of associations regarding desire, flowers, and female genitalia, Epstein asserts that “Indeed, the very word that was used to address the Buddha, the honorific Sanskrit title *Bhagwan*, has its derivation in the word for vulva” (Epstein 2006: 37). This astonishing bit of information had me looking for a reference and, there naturally being none, then running for my Monier Williams. Among many more familiar definitions, including that which is by far the most likely—lord—is a single very late instance of genital meaning. Epstein selects the evidence he finds useful, despite its implausibility, in service of his own idiosyncratic understanding of *bhagvān*.

In the same way Preece naturalizes Jungian theory, and Wright evolutionary psychology, Epstein naturalizes Perennialism. In each case, aspects of Buddhist thought are explained by first decontextualizing some concept and then identifying it with a preferred, naturalized system. Thus,

²⁴ My thanks to my friends David Gordon White, Hugh Urban, Glen Hayes, and Timalsina Sthaneshwar who did their best to help me untangle what Epstein might be meaning by employing the left-hand/right-hand distinction. The issues involved are more complex than can be discussed in full here, and we can provide only a brief summary of the wisdom shared by these siddhas. The distinction has more to do with purity and impurity than with good and evil, or with positive and negative valorizations of sexuality. The terminology of “*dakṣinacara*” and “*vamacara*” is widely used to distinguish orthodox, i.e., Vedic and Puranic practices, from heterodox, i.e., tantric ones, and that terminology dates from an early period. As Timalsina noted, “This question is culture-specific and linking left and right hands only to Tantra will not go deep enough.” (personal communication, email, 13 Sept. 2015).

the authors evade responsibility for their own interpretation (an act of Sartrean bad faith), and instead reduce Buddhism to their own ~~interpretation~~.

Conclusion

As the discourse of Buddhism and psychology is necessarily interpretive, I have sketched out three different strategies employed within it: interpretation of, interpretation as, and ~~interpretation~~. The “interpretation of” Buddhism from the perspective of psychology was taken by Carl Jung, Franz Alexander, and Fokke Sierksma. This approach takes for granted that the concepts, categories, and concerns of psychology can be applied universally, ignoring the cultural location of psychology as itself a modern, Western discourse. Other authors, here exemplified by Alan Watts, have employed “interpretation as” to see Buddhism as a kind of psychology. Similarities between the two are taken to indicate that they have understandings of human consciousness that can be unified into a single discursive system. In contrast to both of these, ~~interpretation~~ simply assumes the identity of the two and obscures the interpretive project altogether. Rob Preece, Robert Wright, and Mark Epstein exemplify this approach. In my view, none of these strategies orients itself adequately to the facts and complex history of Buddhist praxis. As an analytic perspective, this article’s threefold schema provides both scholars and practitioners with a means by which to critically examine different projects in the Buddhism and psychology discourse.

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