

Buddhism, Psychology, and Geopolitics

Asian traditions have too often been distorted by being caught up in Western debates over the supposedly necessary opposition of religion and science. Those who find the Western scientific worldview uncongenial treat Eastern philosophies with exaggerated reverence. Scientists with a distaste for New Age superficialities dismiss them as primitive superstitions. Neither position is helpful. A more informed engagement between Buddhism and Western psychology has emerged over recent decades. It indicates a more productive way forward, helped by recent changes in psychology.

Research >
General

By John Pickering

Interaction between Asian and Western traditions reflects the geopolitical context. In modern times, this context was colonial expansion. For the colonizers, it meant discovery and esoteric encounters. For the colonized, it largely meant exploitation. As colonialism peaked, exploitation was disguised as 'bringing civilization'. Now, cyber-colonization does much the same thing. With the explosive growth of the Internet, texts, images, and sounds from any part of the global village may be discovered, blended, and marketed in a recombinant culture of global commodification.

Deconstruction, the postmodern insight into the discursive production of knowledge, demonstrates that what we know is more culture-bound than the rhetoric of modernity had led us to believe. It has produced the 'skepticism towards meta-narratives' identified by Lyotard as the essence of the postmodern condition. It means the end of scientific, religious, or political claims to predominance. This is not to retreat into relativism but to move towards pluralism and a more even-handed treatment of what different ways of encountering the world might have to offer, both alone and in combination. This is the postmodern condition. It is the geopolitical context in which interaction between Buddhism and Western psychology now proceeds.

Here we look briefly at the history of interaction, review

some changes in Western psychology, and conclude with a short comparison of Buddhist and Western attitudes to suffering. New meaning is synthesized from cultural forms that would previously have been considered too distant in time and space. Thus, the postmodern geopolitical context promotes a more productive and even-handed interaction between Buddhism and psychology.

Changes in psychology

From the late 1950s until the early 1990s psychology's predominant paradigm was cognitivism, whose metaphor for mental life was information processing or, more formally, computation. Although richer than the behaviourism it displaced, it was just as scientific in its denial of subjectivity. Feelings, intentions, and experience, 'what it's like to be' a mental subject, were effectively excluded from the discipline. It was assumed that once sufficient data had been gathered, these would prove to be reducible to information processing, computation or even to physics.

This was a distant legacy of the Enlightenment: the belief that formal laws could be discovered beneath all aspects of reality, from the movements of the planets to the operations of the human mind. This belief influenced the nineteenth-century union of philosophy and experimental science that produced modern psychology. Then, as the scientific revolution seemed to be reaching some sort of culmination, it seemed possible that nature, including mental life and consciousness, might be completely reducible to physical laws. This enthusiasm touched the founders of modern psychology, who were confident that as the science of mental life progressed, pre-scientific traditions such as religions would be discarded as oppressive superstitions.

The twentieth century has brought such confidence to an end. Although science and technology have become more powerful than even the enthusiasts of the late nineteenth century could have imagined, the belief that the world might be reducible to physics has vanished. Ironically, this is due to scientific discoveries showing that given the right conditions, the material world self-organizes into complex systems that have emergent properties not pre-figured in any particular part of the system. Hence reductionism fails: no inventory of parts taken at a particular instant can predict how a system will behave as a whole.

Postmodernism is in part a response to discovering such limitations of the Enlightenment legacy. It has created a more eclectic cultural condition in which the scientism that has limited psychology is being overcome. The mechanistic worldview of nineteenth-century science is being replaced by an organic view of the mind's place in nature. Psychologists are re-discovering William James' insight that mental life cannot be reduced to physical laws or formal rules. Feeling, rather than information processing, is now taken as the primordial character of mental life. After decades of neglect, consciousness has regained its position as the most important topic in psychology. Experience is no longer approached as something to be explained away, but as something intrinsic to living systems.

In short, Western psychology is regaining consciousness. As it does so, it comes face to face with the facts of subjectivity and selfhood. But since science achieved its predominance by treating the world in strictly objective terms, this produces a creative tension. It exposes the need to broaden scientific methods.

Here, postmodernism helps; in its constructive form by promoting the synthesis of diverse traditions, in its deconstructive form by showing that scientific discoveries and methods are more historically contingent than had been supposed. Rather than dogmatically claiming that science finds out what is 'really real', it now takes its place among many modes of discourse through which people make a worldview. To paraphrase the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty: 'Truth is made, not found.'

In psychology this means a return to including lived experience as primary data, as William James, Henri Bergson, and Edmund Husserl proposed. This opens the way to a deeper interaction with Buddhism which, from its inception, has done just that. Over two and a half thousand years of critical refinement and assimilation has made it one of the most enduring efforts to understand the human condition and its

difficulties. With the vigorous growth of Western psychology and with the more informed interactions with Buddhism of recent times, the synthesis of new meaning from the two traditions is well underway. The consequences are unpredictable, but they are likely to be useful and timely.

Suffering

Part of the Enlightenment legacy was the belief and the expectation that life would be made better. Science and technology would replace religious dogma and lead society on to rational justice and plenty. In many respects this has proved to be true. In westernized cultures, disease, pain, and want are controllable as never before. The life span is increasing and there is an abundance of goods and pleasures.

Yet dissatisfaction and suffering are as much a part of life as ever they were. In some ways they are made worse by the media and advertising technology, perhaps the most significant technology of recent times, which manufactures desire by manipulating minds. It spreads images of rich lifestyles over the globe, increasing the desire to consume and to possess. But these lifestyles are unobtainable for the majority of the world's population and in any case they are unsustainable. The environmental and political costs of this situation are already producing violence and further suffering. A sense of unease is growing, but this gets little attention in most psychology. Computational models of consumer choice are more valued than examination of the consequences of consumerism.

The psychology of mental illness is perhaps an exception here. Over the past couple of decades a few psychiatrists and psychotherapists, advocates of what is called *ecopsychology*, have suggested that individual disorder may reflect a wider sense of a disordered world. Part of the suffering felt by the mentally ill may be an awareness that technology is running out of control and doing violent damage.

Ecopsychology aims at: 'Healing the mind, restoring the earth'. Its advocates know that this requires a deeper, internalized, appreciation of the interdependence of human mental life and the life of other beings. Here, there is a significant contrast between East and West. The modern Western image of the human condition is that it stands apart from a world, which thus becomes the object of manipulation. A contrasting Eastern image is that of Indira's net, from the *avatamsaka sutra*. It symbolizes a world of organic interconnectivity in which the life of every part, including that of human beings, reflects the life of every other.

Healers informed by these different images may approach suffering differently. Western medicine has had great success in identifying physical illness with single causes. Accordingly, suffering will tend to be treated as if it meant the presence of something alien. Buddhism, by contrast, takes suffering to be part of normal existence. Hence its treatment will tend to be sought in better adjustment to the conditions of life.

Cyber-colonization dominates contemporary geopolitics. In the short term, this may commodify Asian traditions into mere spiritual fashion accessories. But in the longer term, their depth and resilience will maintain their authenticity. The postmodern turn promotes a richer interaction, beyond the opposition of religion and science, in which no one way of encountering the world predominates. In this pluralist framework, new meaning is synthesized in constructive, informed discourse between traditions. Hence Buddhism and psychology can recognize each other as two of many approaches to the universal condition of exercising human consciousness within in a world not of our making. ◀

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Sheba Chhachhi
'Raktpushp I'
(detail), 1997 Poly-carbonsheet, black and white photos (bromides and film positives), text on acrylic, red cord, miscellaneous objects, light.



Courtesy of Sheba Chhachhi