



ISSN 1076-9005
Volume 5 1998:86-89
Publication date: 1 May 1998

The Authority of Experience: Essays on Buddhism and Psychology. Edited by John Pickering. London: Curzon Press, 1997. Pp. 250. ISBN: 0700704558, US \$22.95 [clothbound ISBN: 0700704507, US \$42.00].

Reviewed by

Gay Watson
Email:DCandGW@compuserve.com

© 1998 Gay Watson

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the editors. All enquiries to jbe-ed@psu.edu.

The dialogue between psychology and Buddhism is perhaps the longest and richest of those between Buddhism and any western discourse. After D.T. Suzuki's initial presentation of Zen in the light of his interest in western psychology, and Jung's enthusiasm, much of the borrowing has been from Buddhism to psychotherapy; a pragmatic and practical borrowing of techniques such as meditation. More recently as western philosophy and science have been faced with uncertainty and relativity, the 'end of metaphysics', and the deconstruction of logocentrism, Buddhism's own philosophy of dependent origination and emptiness has come to resonate attractively with the postmodern condition. At the same time the new hybrid discipline of cognitive science is attempting to find a rigorous method of exploring consciousness, subjectivity and the phenomenological experience of the world that it has finally understood cannot be omitted from a true and valuable science. To this end, as the title of this collection states, there is in the West an interest in yoking the authority of experience to the authority of science. Thus, cognitive scientists are turning to Buddhism to explore and appreciate its long history of the exploration of mind. It offers, in the words of John Pickering from another paper, "a rough approximation of a phenomenological psychology founded on process metaphysics" ("Buddhism and Cognitivism: a Postmodern Appraisal," *Asian Philosophy* 5, no. 1 [1995]).

It is thus timely and pleasant to welcome a book of collected papers on this theme from respected academic writers. Unlike most such collections which have arisen from colloquia or conferences, these essays were specifically solicited by the editor in an attempt to open up the dialogue between psychology and Buddhism in order to integrate qualitative and phenomenological methods with those of cognitive neuroscience. The editor hoped to show that "even though Buddhism and psychology may make different claims to authority they can nonetheless be brought closer together within a systematic and realistic inquiry into experience" (p. xiv). Despite this coherent plan and the editor's preface to each individual essay (which helps to maintain the framework), this is still a somewhat diverse, and at times, divergent selection of papers.

The book opens well with Eleanor Rosch's contribution, illustrating the intention of the volume. She uses a Tibetan story to illuminate the difference between an alienated understanding and an enlightened one. She shows that the idea of mind espoused by cognitive science is that of samsaric mind experienced by beginning meditators. Further meditative experience reveals glimpses of a different mode of knowing and being, a process view of body, mind, emotions and interpersonal relations in which all aspects of experience, previously treated as separate, are seen to form an integrated whole, in which mind and body, cognition and emotion, perceiver and perceived, ac-

tion and knowing, self and world are no longer separate. She considers the implications of such a view for psychology in the hope that, as such, a new mode of knowing is transformative to an individual personally, and it can likewise be transformative to science.

From the Buddhist perspective, Padmal de Silva presents a remarkably clear and concise portrait of Buddhist psychology, its relation to Buddhist philosophy and to western psychology, and its possible integration with western psychology and more particularly with psychotherapy. Herbert Guenther's essay begins by stating that the going is the way, and it is, in some sense, a performative text. Through unexpected terminology and avoidance of the commonly accepted translations, Guenther's exposition can lead to illumination for those who have the stamina to stay the turnings and twisting of the journey down unfamiliar routes, as long as they follow the Buddha's exhortation to "strive incessantly".

Strangely, since most of the published dialogue between Buddhism and psychology has been concerned with the field of psychotherapy, this is not a strong section of the present book. While Joy Manne's contribution testifies to the way Buddhism speaks to very different psychotherapeutic approaches, its style as a book review sits somewhat uncomfortably in the collection, as it relies so heavily on material outside the text. From a more theoretical perspective, John Pickering's own contribution "Selfhood is a Process" succinctly weaves together all the themes the book intends to address: the manner in which Buddhism can help to enable a post-cognitive, postmodern approach to science and psychology; embodiment and selfhood; and the reconnection of fact and value. In the final section, Elizabeth Valentine considers private and public validation of knowledge and the contribution of sensory experience, rational thought, and meditative insight, as considered by both Buddhist and scientific epistemologies. She argues that both conclusions and methods must be open to constant revision, and she ends with Heraclitus' most Buddhist of observations that "all things flow; change is the only reality." The last word goes to John Crook and is a plea for authenticity, even in the face of unknowing.

There is much of value and enjoyment in this collection. Although, as mentioned, there has been a fair amount published concerning Buddhism and psychotherapy, little has yet appeared concerned with the more fundamental and theoretical questions that are particularly addressed in this book, and it is all the more welcome for this. Sadly, however, many misspellings and typographical errors mar the text. There are also conspicuous errors of fact. In one essay it appears that the five *skandhas* are confused with the six sense consciousnesses; reference is made several times to six *skandhas*. In the same paper, a reference to "an unprecedented period of peace and har-

mony” (p. 39) in Tibetan history between 900 C.E. and the Chinese invasion of 1950 is startling to anyone versed in the subject. In another paper, an unelaborated reference to Nāgārjuna as “early Buddhist” (p. 190) is questionable, especially when it is followed by a very monist and late Mahāyāna interpretation of his writing on the basis of a work that is unreliably attributed to Nāgārjuna, as the author admits in a footnote. If western science seeks to benefit from Buddhism’s long history of the phenomenological exploration of consciousness, it must surely treat the facts of that discipline with as much rigor as it asks of its own research.