

phenomenological indicators of the non-graspability of enlightened insight (as expounded by Wright, pp. 199–200), without the implications of radical epistemological scepticism that the phrase “denial of all claims to truth” suggests.

Wright contests the use of “enlightenment” as the standard English term for the Zen experience, pointing out that there is no exact equivalent for it in Huang Po and suggesting that it attempts to graft the Zen world onto the European Enlightenment (p. 182). This is far-fetched; “enlightenment” is a fairly straightforward translation of Japanese *satori*. It is also far-fetched to characterize the claim that Zen perceives “things as they are” as a “rhetorical figure drawn from European rationalism” (p. 182), ultimately deriving from Descartes’ use of meditation to purify the mind so as to see clearly and without prejudice. The obvious source of the expression is Sanskrit *tathata* (thusness, suchness), which D. T. Suzuki associates with the homely Japanese expressions *kono-mama* and *sono-mama*, “just as it is.” I noticed some slight inaccuracies in Wright’s critique of Blofeld. Note 22 on page 186 reads: “The Zen master is thought ‘to clothe invisible Reality in the garments of the religion then and there prevailing’ (Blofeld, *The Zen Teaching of Hui Hai*, p. 18).” In fact, in the passage quoted Blofeld says the opposite of this: he speaks of “three alternatives—to remain silent . . . ; to clothe invisible Reality . . . ; or to point the way by systematically demolishing all the categories of thought. . . . It is this last approach which gave rise to . . . Zen.” Again, Wright says that Blofeld sees Enlightenment as “an Ultimate Perfection lying beyond the realm of ever-changing forms” (p. 184), but the reference in Blofeld’s text is to the object of Pure Land faith.

A mere review is not the place to resolve the issues dealt with in Dale Wright’s profoundly attentive study of a classic moment in Zen history. As we continue to struggle with these issues, his book will remain a landmark point of reference.

Joseph S. O’Leary
Sophia University, Tokyo

THE HAPPINESS PROJECT: TRANSFORMING THE THREE POISONS THAT CAUSE THE SUFFERING WE INFLICT ON OURSELVES AND OTHERS. By Ron Leifer, M.D. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1997. 313 pp.

This book focuses mostly on Buddhism and psychotherapy, but it ranges widely and includes many reflections on Christianity. Today there are many good books that compare Buddhism with Western psychology, but this one is not to be missed by anyone interested in the topic. Leifer (a former colleague and friend of Ernest Becker, who wrote *The Denial of Death*) is obviously a very experienced psychiatrist, with deep knowledge of psychoanalytic theory to supplement his many years of practice

as a therapist. This book is many things: a primer on demythologized Buddhism; a superior “self-help” book; a history of psychotherapy, including a critique of its modern medicalization; a speculative account of the evolution of human consciousness; and, not least, the most insightful interpretations of the Job, Oedipus, and Eden myths that I have encountered. The prose style is lucid, and only space limitations keep me from quoting it at length.

The title turns out to be ironic, since our Happiness Projects are the main source of our unhappiness. Our selfish strivings for happiness are, paradoxically, the main cause of the suffering we inflict on ourselves and others. What we “fail to see” (*avidya*) is not some great mysterious wisdom. “The core of the esoteric knowledge we seek consists of secrets we hide from ourselves. We hide from them because they are not what we want them to be. The world is not what we want it to be. Life is not what we want it to be. Others are not what we want them to be. We are not ourselves what we want to be. We hide from these truths because they mystify and terrify us” (12). The basic “secret” of happiness is that the three poisons—greed, ill will, and ignorance—are the source of our pain and suffering, by creating rebounding karmic ripples. The ego is a trickster who is continually the victim of his own trickery. True happiness can only be the product of an inner transformation that changes our habitual patterns of thought and action, enabling us to “relax into existence.” Leifer’s psychologized Buddhism is a therapeutic path cleansed of the mystical and paranormal; there is no place here for psychic powers or any transcendental salvation (nirvana is not discussed). The focus throughout is on how we are bedeviled by our own desires.

The book is organized into four main parts. The first offers Leifer’s understanding of the first two Buddhist truths. The second part, “Western Views of Suffering,” includes profound interpretations of Job and Oedipus Rex. Job’s suffering illustrates the first truth, that life is suffering, and his patience is virtuous, even heroic, in its refusal to demand that life be different than it is—an endurance that allows him to avoid making life worse: “Patience is the willingness to suffer without aggression” (131).

The key to the Oedipus story is in his answer to the Sphinx’s riddle: humans are the creatures who walk on four legs as infants, on two legs as mature adults, and then on three legs (with a cane) in old age. The riddle is a metaphor for the truths of our impermanence, old age and death. But Oedipus cannot accept it. “From a Buddhist point of view, the story of Oedipus is a metaphor for neurotic mind. Oedipus was the victim of his own grasping ego—of his desires and aggressions. His fate was sealed by his own efforts to escape it. The source of Oedipus’ pain and tragedy were his own ignorance, passion, and aggression: the three poisons” (135). His desire for Mom is better understood as a symbol of human desire generally: our refusal to grow up and take responsibility for what happens, to accept that life requires self-control. Killing Dad is a symbol for the human aggression that occurs when our desires are thwarted: the desire to be free from the pleasure-seeking restrictions imposed by authority. The universal wish represented by the mythical Oedipus is to remain an infant yet still be a king—a “Baby-King” whose unexpressed desires are immediately fulfilled. Thus

redefined, Oedipus demonstrates the second truth—the suffering caused by the three poisons—even as Job demonstrates a more mature response to the first.

An even more effective response was taught by Jesus, whose life demonstrates the path of unconditioned love for others. The radical truth he realized is that such love is the best way to transcend the sufferings of life, not only for the benefit of others but even more for the transformation of ourselves. As a way to live this is relatively simple to understand but extremely difficult to follow, so individually and culturally we have repressed his way into another secret—i.e., something obvious we are nonetheless unable to see. Curious, isn't it: although we all want to be loved, and although the most loved person in Western history is Jesus, we are unable to draw the obvious conclusion.

Part 3, “The Western Understanding of Desire,” includes a perceptive account of our Fall from Eden. As children become socialized they sublimate their body-sensuous consciousness into a “mind-meaning” consciousness that develops a Happiness Project. Desire becomes transformed into ambition. Present sensuous pleasure is renounced for the sake of future happiness. Eden was paradise because spontaneous desires were satisfied freely. However, the true Fall did not occur because Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit; the Fall was the forbidden fruit itself, the archetypal prohibition “Thou shalt not.” The taboo meant that at least one desire could not be satisfied, on pain of death—so Adam and Eve must already have had foreknowledge of death. The Fall was implied in the prohibition and the decision this necessitated: should I, or shouldn't I? This reflected and inhibited desire, creating the moral order that gives family and society their structure.

Of course, sublimating sensuous desire into a Happiness Project does not solve the human problem; it poses it. The wish to gratify desire and (on another level) the fear of gratifying desire—out of that cauldron, the suffering ego is born.

Demythologized, the tragedy of sin/karma is our mistaken belief that pursuing our selfish desires will make us happy. Sin and karma are the religious names for desires causing suffering. Again, the reason we cannot see the problem with such desires is that it is too simple: whatever we want, we must feel deprived of. Desire cannot avoid being haunted by deprivation. “The pursuit of happiness is a tragic quest because happiness is not possible in the presence of desire” (180).

If selfish desire causes suffering, morality becomes something different than we have usually understood it. We tend to be preoccupied with the inevitable conflict built into a fixed code of right versus wrong (necessary to regulate our conduct from “outside”). In a capsule history of Western ethical theory, Leifer demonstrates that the basic ethical issue is actually quite different: learning how to choose between conflicting desires in order to find the optimum path to happiness. This makes ethical conduct a function of wisdom (insight into how our minds work) as much as willful conduct.

Some elegant chapters on the development of psychotherapy reveal how it discovered the same basic truth, that suffering is caused by desire. Neurosis is due to conflicting desires we do not want to take responsibility for. Freud realized that the

cause of our psychic pain is our egotistical desires in the face of impermanence, leading to their repression (a type of *avidya*). The basic problem, again, is that desires often have negative consequences. However, Freud's own desire to make psychoanalysis into a value-neutral science caused him to try to "medicalize" the problem of desire. That tendency is much more widespread and pernicious today, due to the vast profits to be made by attributing psychological problems to biochemical imbalances requiring expensive drugs—thus not requiring any self-understanding or self-transformation.

Part 4, on "Western Views of Self," includes a long speculative account of how human self-consciousness may have evolved. This discussion seems tangential to the main focus of the book and less illuminating. But the only aspect of the book that left me unsatisfied was some occasional reflections on politics and economics. Despite a provocative quotation from Gandhi's autobiography—"He who does not understand that politics is religion and religion is politics understands neither politics nor religion"—there seems to be little place in Leifer's approach for anything like a socially engaged Buddhism (or psychotherapy). He does nothing to challenge the traditional psychoanalytic (and Buddhist?) view that unnecessary suffering can be ended only by transforming ourselves. It seems that our egotistical minds merely need to accept and adjust to physical and social realities; that they are not what we want them to be is our problem, not theirs. A chapter on "Suffering and Politics" critiques political attempts to relieve suffering and compares the history of Marxism with the history of Judeo-Christianity. Both were betrayed by disciples who became devils, causing more suffering than they relieved. True enough, but another way to understand such perversions is that greed, ill will, and delusion have sometimes become objectified into institutions that therefore sometimes need to be challenged collectively.

This is an important issue if, as I suspect, the social and environmental problems that face us today are too great and too urgent to be addressed simply by encouraging each of us to focus on transforming our own minds. What Leifer so lucidly demonstrates and recommends is undoubtedly necessary for any satisfactory solution to those problems, but is it sufficient? An economic system that institutionalizes greed, for example, may need to be challenged on an institutional level as well. In fact, learning how to do that may be one of the foremost problems currently facing both Buddhism and Christianity if they are to be serious about addressing the causes of widespread suffering today.

But I certainly do not want to end this review on a negative note. No book can do everything, and what *The Happiness Project* does very well is provide perhaps the most insightful account yet of what a demythologized, psychologized Buddhism has to offer a world that sorely needs it.

David R. Loy
Bunkyo University

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