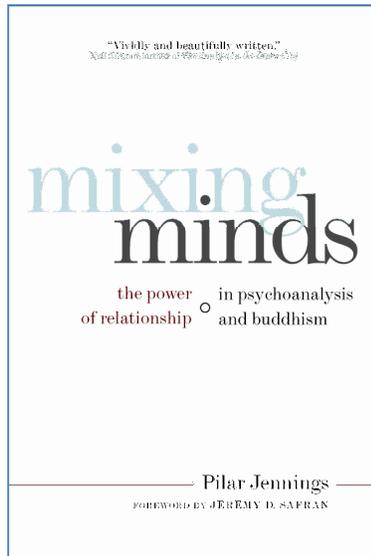


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Mixing Minds

The Power of Relationship in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism

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By Pilar Jennings

Q&A with Pilar Jennings

Q: The body of literature on therapy and Buddhism has been growing steadily over the past 25 years. What are you hoping to add to this conversation through *Mixing Minds*?

A: In short, a focus on relationships. I think most people go into therapy and pursue Buddhist practice in order to have an easier time in their relationships - to themselves and with others. Generally speaking, spiritual and religious practitioners, particularly American Buddhists, are not meditating because they're curious about transcendental states and esoteric philosophy. We are looking for ways to get along with each other and with ourselves a little better, with less conflict and less suffering. For this reason, I focus on how the two primary healing relationships - the religious teacher and his/her student, and the therapist and his/her patient - and also, what these healing traditions offer people in their efforts to improve their relational experience. It is true that many American Buddhists are curious about philosophy and systems for making meaning. But at bottom, I think they want to feel less isolated and happier in their relationship. That's been true for me, too.

Q: Why is the focus on relationships relevant to religion?

A: In Buddhist practice, and I think this is true of all the great religions, we heal and become our most awakened selves through intimate relationships with our notion of the divine, with religious mentors, and within our religious communities. The healing happens through relationship. Given our collective difficulty in discerning the value of religion, particularly for those who feel some antagonism toward religious belief and practice, I think it's helpful to consider this relational core of religious experience. Some people see psychotherapists to explore their experience in relationships, and many more people try to understand and heal their relational experience via religion. I'm not suggesting that religious practice will necessarily ameliorate one's relational difficulties, although it might. What I am suggesting, is that the primary method for any kind of genuine growth or transformation, is relationship.

Q: In *Mixing Minds* you suggest that many Buddhists and many people in therapy mistakenly imagine that these two healing traditions are taking people to the same place. How are these practices different in their goals and methods?

A: It's not uncommon for serious meditators, particularly for people practicing in places like NYC where they are aware of psychotherapy, to suggest that they don't need therapy because they have their spiritual practice. And for some, this may be true. But these statements often indicate an assumption that one's spiritual practice necessarily addresses the same issues/dynamics that are explored in therapy. There's a great deal of synergy between the traditions, but their tools and primary objectives are radically different. Buddhist practice is not a system designed to explore our early childhood experience, the particular nuances of our family system, or our sexual behavior. It can shed tremendous insight into our relationship and our struggles with addiction, etc. But it has no early childhood doctrine, nor is it intended to be a system focused on the particularities of the individual, his/her social location, her psychological constitution. Psychotherapy, in contrast, goes in close and seeks to explore the individual experience, how a particular patient has been influenced by particular caretakers with very specific histories and attributes. In this way, it seeks to build up a client's ego, their sense of self, their subjectivity. Buddhism, in contrast, challenges our ego position, and tries to cultivate a deeper sense of inter-being, of sharing the same basic human markers as all others. This is just one example of many in how the traditions differ.

Q: How are Buddhism and psychotherapy compatible? And why do they need each other, as you suggest?

A: For many people who practice both traditions, there is a truly winning combination of building up our sense of self, of developing more self-confidence through therapy, while simultaneously softening our grip on a particular identity or an inflated ego position through our Buddhist practice. This is only one example, but I think it speaks to how these traditions can help each other. Buddhism is such a powerful tradition and practice that helps people understand why we struggle with ourselves so much, why we so often feel that we're lacking something we should have or be. It really gets to the core of our chronic fears of being too insubstantial. At the same time, we do need a conventional self in order to negotiate our lives skillfully. It's helpful to have some ego strength, to feel that we're deserving of a meaningful professional life, that we have enough confidence to seek experiences - even spiritual experience - and relationships that are fulfilling. Without this ego strength, which is largely the domain of psychotherapy, it can be difficult to ask for help, and to seek friendships and professional opportunities. So I think for many of us American Buddhists, it's useful to have a practice that helps us feel less tethered to our conventional identities, with all the anxiety associated with these identities—whether it's being a great writer, lover, or mother—while also understanding the ways in which these identities can have real meaning and offer fulfillment.

Q: Why did you begin practicing Buddhism? Why do you stick with it?

A: I was first introduced to meditation as a child, through a meditation course I took with my mother. And in my teens and early 20s I read a lot of spiritual literature and practiced quite a bit of yoga. So, from an early age I was drawn to contemplative methods for relaxing the mind and body. As I moved into my 20s and 30s, the wish to practice a religious and spiritual tradition with greater commitment had a lot to do with the wish to reduce suffering - my own and the collective suffering that seemed terribly ubiquitous. By the time I was in my early 20s it was pretty clear to me that this is a tough world we're in. Like many of my fellow New Yorkers, I turned to religion and spiritual practice with greater commitment in the wake of 9/11. Those initial weeks and months after the attacks were so awful for so many people. For me, meditation

and spiritual community were incredibly helpful in getting through that time. Once I felt myself coming through it - which really took years - I began to grow more curious about how I might sustain a sense of inner rest, of emotional grounding, even if there were future attacks. I began to get more invested in understanding what the mental and spiritual components are that allow some people to survive the most horrendous traumas with their psyches intact. Increasingly, I attributed this capacity to the spiritual and religious domain.

Q: Many people are attracted to Buddhism because they feel that it offers the best of spiritual practice without the mess of organized religion. You argue that Buddhism is in fact a religion, and that this understanding can be useful to the psychological well-being of its practitioners. How so?

A: In American Buddhism, there's a history that goes back many decades of lifting Buddhism from its historical origins. And doing so has been helpful to many people who come to Buddhism after negative experiences with formal religion. There are thousands of Buddhist centers throughout this country that are spare in decorum, where the teachers tend to be Westerners, often married and with busy professional lives; such centers are inviting to Americans who want to learn meditation, but want nothing to do with religion. The down side, I believe, to this Westernized version of Buddhism, is that it can dilute the real fruits of a traditional, religious Buddhism. In the Mahayana traditions, the teachings are offered through rituals and devotional relationships that are a direct challenge to our Western emphasis on individuality, and living as a discrete being with ultimate power to control ourselves and our lives. Generally speaking, we don't like the notion of deference. We're enculturated to be ambitious, self-directed, and independent. The rituals and focus of religious Buddhism, in contrast, is primarily on cultivating a core and unwavering sense of dependency - on all beings. I think religious Buddhism offers a remarkable challenge to Western practitioners that is potentially sacrificed when Buddhism is stripped of its original methods and made perhaps, too malleable for the contemporary practitioner.

Q: Is there a psychological downside to being an American Buddhist that you feel therapists should know about?

A: There are many psychological pitfalls to practicing Buddhism as a Westerner. The primary pitfall, I believe, is using one's practice to avoid strong emotions. It's almost become a cultural joke - the Western spiritualist who has a saccharine smile constantly plastered on their face, who seems to deny the reality of anger, and whose aggression tends to come out passively. One of the great Buddhist teachings is mindfulness, which simply means bringing our awareness to each moment of our lives without trying to change it. Now, this teaching can unconsciously get translated into a wish to sit lofty above the muck and mire of strong feeling, because feelings can be embarrassing and a real assault to our spiritual personas. In this way, Buddhism can become a place of hiding the truth of our minds rather than really getting to know our minds, as is intended. Some of the core teachings—no self, emptiness—etc., can similarly be used to bypass the mess of relationship by appropriating these teachings as fuel for isolation or generally disconnected behavior. I have heard of more than one story of such and such a family member who is a long-term Buddhist, has received many high teachings from great teachers, and is generally a pain in the neck to deal with—they're arrogant, and almost slightly autistic, and they don't even know it.

Q: Despite the growing interest in Buddhist meditation among Westerners, are there any common misperceptions of this tradition that are relevant to the psychological experience of Western Buddhists?

A: Yes. I think most American Buddhists (this is of course a generalization with many exceptions) nevertheless, many of us imagine that Buddhist practice will make life *easier*. We'll get peaceful, exceptionally patient, and striking for our wisdom. But, I think the truth is that practicing Buddhism puts into stark relief the reality of our neuroses and our tremendous struggles in the relational realm. As we practice the dharma, it simply becomes harder to ignore what fruitcakes we tend to be. This, I think, is a primary misconception. And it would probably be helpful if more people attracted to the dharma had some sense of this, so that they're less inclined to walk away from the practice when it becomes unpleasant, which invariably it is.

Q: In this post 9/11 era, discussions of religious tolerance or pluralism are growing more important as the fear of religious terrorism continues. Is there a Buddhist view on this issue of tolerating religious diversity that might be helpful to consider? And do you have thoughts on this matter as a Buddhist therapist?

A: There is a wonderful Buddhist teaching on “holding one's views lightly” that I have always found to be quite helpful. The basic idea is that if we can relate to our chosen viewpoints with a little bit of elbow room, we'll more easily see what it has to offer, its nuances, and possibilities. When we grasp onto our views with excessive force, we'll be distracted by that force and lose sight of what we're actually holding on to. Now, I'm not suggesting that all Buddhists are able to do this. Buddhism has its own issues with sectarianism—with inter-sangha squabbles of who teaches the dharma “correctly” or who has studied with the truly great teachers, etc. But, in theory, and potentially in practice, learning to be more mindful of how we tend to grasp onto our chosen theories, religious views, etc., with aggression and fear, can be an enormous boon, particularly when it comes to cultivating the humility necessary for tolerating and even growing more curious about contrasting religious traditions.

Q: Do you believe that therapy works? Does it deliver what it promises, or is something more needed in order for it to help people enjoy their lives more?

A: Daphne Merkin's recent *New York Times* article on her 40-year experience as a patient, mused on this question. And what I appreciated about the article was her honest ambivalence. For her, therapy helped in some ways, and perhaps didn't help enough in other ways. I would have to say that's been true for me, too. I've learned a great deal about myself, my history, my emotional habits and neuroses. It's also been a place where I could share more of myself within the context of a very personal and close relationship. This has been tremendously healing - to share the most vulnerable parts of myself and my experience, and be received with real compassion and curiosity. But I couldn't fairly say that therapy alone has done much by way of creating more abiding happiness in my life. For me, this type of basic, foundational change came through my spiritual practice, and therapy helped me to understand why I needed a practice that generated a deeper sense of appreciation for myself and all beings. Therapy is a powerful method, but I think it still lacks insight into how people can transcend Freud's concept of common unhappiness, and move toward a genuine and steadfast joy. I am not discounting the value and importance of therapy; I am sure there are countless people who would have taken their own lives or someone else's if it weren't for their experience in therapy. And in this way, it can be life-changing. But I'm not convinced that psychotherapy, generally speaking, has yet moved into the domain of real transformation.

Q: What do you have to say to classical Freudians who remain loyal to their founding father in a continued antagonism toward religion?

A: Well, classical Freudians have plenty of company in their perception of religion as a childlike wish for protection from our basic vulnerability, a wish to be spared the awesome and final truth of death through heavenly realms, etc. But I might humbly suggest that the common

denominator in people of faith, is not the wish for salvation, but a wish to transcend the interests and trapping of the self. This, I think, is the very nature and purpose of religion—to help people find ways to soften our tendency to be hugely invested in ourselves, at the expense of our ability to notice the reality of others. Let's face it, if you could sneak into people's thoughts, you would not hear a pervasive worry about how that other guy over there is going to handle his child's medical crisis, or how the woman sitting next to me will manage to feel better about herself. What we'd hear is a constant drone of self-obsession—how can I get rid of my insane partner, how can I lose ten pounds before I die, how can I have more sex with a more interesting and dazzling partner, how can I show the world that I have special insight, how can I kill myself and somehow stay alive at the same time...these are the questions we ponder. And religion is meant to help us put ourselves into perspective. With all due respect, it's possible that the Dawkins and Hitchens amongst us, have not had personal experience with this self-transcendence that is at the heart of all the worlds' religions.



Pilar Jennings, Ph.D. is a writer and researcher who has focused on the clinical applications of Buddhist meditation practice. She received her Ph.D. in Psychiatry and Religion from Union Theological Seminary, and has been working with patients and their families through the Harlem Family Institute since 2004. Prior to this training, she earned a Masters degree in medical anthropology from Columbia University, and a Bachelors degree in interdisciplinary writing from Barnard College. Pilar is a long-term practitioner of Tibetan and Vipassana Buddhism, and has studied with senior teachers in both traditions. She has also trained as a Buddhist chaplain through the Zen Center for Contemplative Care. Pilar Jennings lives in New York City.

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