Aronson’s book is predicated upon the notion that Buddhist practice alone does not address all of the modern psychological concerns of its western adepts. The reasons for this lack are rooted in cultural difference. Buddhism developed within a cultural and psychological context that emphasizes interdependence over individuation, emotional restraint over expression, and duty over rights. These divergent cultural values often lead Westerners who adopt Buddhist practice to misinterpret the true meaning of the teachings. However, in these instances the practice is not merely underutilized; worse, it is assimilated into preexisting emotional patterns. The spiritual path that promises total liberation is subverted to support and reinforce dysfunctional ways of being. For instance, westerners who are affectively restricted may remain so, in spite of their diligent practice. As Aronson so colorfully expresses it: “If we take a machine with a restricted range of motion and spray it with lubricant, we will have a smoother-running machine but still one with a limited range of motion” (p. 192). This formulation contrasts with an alternative metaphor from Ram Dass (1991), who observed that whereas spiritual systems offer the prospect of total liberation, psychotherapy merely enables us to rearrange the furniture inside our prison. For Aronson, Westerners are caught in a psychological prison as well as a spiritual one, and the ideal is to combine both psychotherapeutic approaches and spiritual practice: “If utilized carefully, the skills of meditation can contribute to our psychological well-being, while the insights of psychology can create the milieu within which our meditation can continue to develop” (p. 126).

In laying out this balanced vision, Aronson devotes the early chapters of his book to discussing the critical cultural differences that separate western Buddhist practitioners from their Asian teachers. This discussion takes into account not only the students’ misappropriation of the teachings, but the teachers’ lack of experience with western cultural values. His exploration ranges over familiar cross-cultural terrain (e.g., see Kasulis, 2002), but Aronson infuses it with a contemplative character in line with his approach: “To the extent that spirituality involves enhancing the meaning of our lives and transcending restricted visions of ourselves and others, the process of cross-cultural reflection becomes a spiritual enterprise” (p. 40). The book begins with a very vivid example in which, following a meditation retreat, Aronson compares experiential descriptions of western and Chinese participants. Whereas the retreat experience left Westerners feeling empowered and “in touch with themselves,” the Chinese spoke of shame, selfishness, and the need for repentance. Aronson’s deft expansion upon this and other examples in the first few chapters develops a necessary background perspective for the analysis that follows.

Having delineated these cultural orientations, Aronson then shows how spiritual and psychotherapeutic approaches can be combined. Drawing from systems developed by Almaas (1996) and Progoff (1992), he illustrates methods for combining insights gained through process-oriented mindfulness practice with those of western-style
reflection upon the contents—thoughts and feelings—arising in the process. In so doing, Aronson points to methods for psychospiritual growth that may leave practitioners less prone to the traps that typically ensnare western Buddhists. Although Aronson’s presentation of these methods does not go into great depth, it does serve the purpose of completing the foundation needed for the remainder of the book. What follows is an in-depth examination of the elements of Buddhist thought most consistently misinterpreted by western practitioners: self/no-self, anger, love, and attachment. This examination hinges on the ways the words themselves are understood in the different traditions.

Western practitioners misinterpret the Buddhist notion of self when they fail to distinguish between the ontological and the psychological self. Ontologically, the self has no inherent existence, Buddhism tells us, but psychologically we live in a relative world requiring a sense of independent selfhood. The apparent contradiction between these two positions only arises by virtue of making a category error. In line with Engler (2003), Aronson concludes that, rather than negating the psychological self, meditation actually strengthens it. Accordingly, the Buddhist injunction that we must abandon the ego does not mean that we abandon self-assertion. The instruction to abandon pride, likewise, does not promote an absence of self-esteem; rather, it promotes the realization that there is no metaphysical self. Aronson illustrates both elements in the Buddha himself: “While [the Buddha] psychologically identifies his uniqueness and functioning (an empirical, functioning, “I”), he is not holding or being bound by any concepts of substantiality or permanence (a metaphysical “I”)” (p. 81). While the basic ideas in this chapter may be familiar to some readers, Aronson illustrates them in a clear and compelling manner, elucidating material that is often murky.

Next, Aronson addresses the Buddhist prohibition against anger and the tendency for western practitioners to use this teaching to support habitual patterns of repression. In Buddhism, anger constitutes the wish to harm someone else; as such, Buddhism does not prohibit self-assertion or the setting of boundaries. Nevertheless, many western practitioners eschew and suppress any forceful or aggressive energy arising within them, rendering them unable to set limits and communicate needs. Aronson suggests that Westerners can learn how to communicate more effectively by combining insight gained through meditation practice with guidance from the assertiveness model of western psychology. In one particularly clear example, Aronson demonstrates how he used meditative focus and psychological reflection to overcome anger arising over a remark made by a friend. After attending carefully to the feelings of worthlessness beneath the anger, he recognized these same feelings as having motivated his friend’s comment, a realization that transformed his anger into compassion. This principle suggests a way to use spiritual practice in the service of healthy, interpersonal communication. As Aronson expresses it, “The further step beyond traditional mindfulness practice is that instead of just silently observing the emotions and physical sensations arising as anger, we use these observations as a basis for reporting about ourselves to others” (p. 126).

Aronson’s brief chapter on love serves to introduce the larger topic of attachment, to which he devotes three chapters. Whereas psychological attachment constitutes a developmentally appropriate search for closeness, Buddhist attachment relates to a fixation or clinging to things or ideas. The Buddhist notion of nonattachment is
often confused with disengagement or distancing from life (detachment) rather than the relinquishing of all fixations. Again, the western and Buddhist interpretations of the word are completely compatible if we distinguish between the different levels of analysis that each engages.

These chapters on attachment contain many interesting insights. One that especially caught my attention involves the apparent contradiction between Buddhist teachings on future achievement (“stages of practice”) and the tendency of the ego to attach to such goals. Aronson explains that the notion of achievement is specifically built into the practice to provide the tension by which practitioners must resolve their own habitual forward-looking behaviors. One can extrapolate from such reasoning to consider how the ritual-laden, devotional Tibetan practices carry the potential to heal in Westerners a variety of issues revolving around authority, fundamentalism, pride, and dependency.

Aronson’s book is a delight to read. It is filled with many keen observations and his ideas are well developed. The book is thoroughly researched with ample footnotes, almost excessive in some instances. In spite of its scholarly grounding, Aronson does not get lost in weighty prose or technical jargon. His writing is very warm and humble; in fact, it is deceptively simple. Alongside psychological theory the book is laced with stories from Aronson’s own life, anecdotes of his spiritual teachers, and the occasional reflection or meditation exercise. His more than 30 years of Buddhist practice and his professional work as a psychotherapist are brought to bear with rich insight, and he shows great love for both traditions. This is a book I wish I could have read 14 years ago when I was starting my practice of Tibetan Buddhism and formal study of human psychology. I grappled through many of the same issues that Aronson has dealt with here, and, as such, this book represents familiar terrain for me personally. I am impressed with how clearly Aronson has negotiated that terrain and articulated its key elements. It has been tremendously helpful in making thematic for me truths that I have discovered in my own experience.

Naturally, this book is most applicable to western Buddhist practitioners, whom it will help to steer clear of many of the traps along the path. But it is also of great interest to transpersonal psychotherapists, not only in helping them in their work with practicing Buddhists, but, more generally, in helping them to tease apart and vividly apprehend psychological and spiritual dimensions of human growth and development. Finally, this book is of potential interest to anyone seeking clarity on how to bring together spiritual practice and everyday life.

REFERENCES

The Author

Harvey B. Aronson, Ph.D., M.S.W., is a psychotherapist in private practice and a Buddhist meditation teacher. He is founder and teacher-in-residence at the Dawn Mountain Tibetan Temple, Community Center, and Research Institute in Houston, Texas. He travels and lectures on Buddhist philosophy and psychology at universities and at academic and Buddhist conferences around the country.

Reviewer

Alan Pope, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and a member of the graduate faculty at the University of West Georgia’s humanistic/transpersonal psychology department. He has been a student and practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism since 1991. His research interests include personal transformation through suffering, the application of Buddhist thought to western psychology, and cross-cultural studies.