



the empty bell

Mixing Minds: The Power of
Relationship in Psychoanalysis
and Buddhism

Pilar Jennings

A Book Review by Robert A. Jonas, Ed.D., ©2011

Pilar Jennings. *Mixing Minds: The Power of Relationship in Psychoanalysis and Buddhism*. Boston: Wisdom, 2010.

In this groundbreaking book, Pilar Jennings carefully examines the principles of healing in Tibetan Buddhism and in psychoanalysis. *Mixing Minds* is a must-read for every teacher of Buddhism in America, and for psychologists and psychiatrists who want to understand their work through the lens of Buddhist spirituality. It is not addressed to the casual reader. For those who are unfamiliar with psychoanalytic concepts such as the unconscious, transference, and projection, *Mixing Minds* may be a challenging read, and worth the effort. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals who are unfamiliar with Buddhism will find Jennings' explanation of profound spiritual insights both fascinating and easy to grasp. Pilar Jennings has studied not only the voluminous psychoanalytic and Buddhist literature -- she has also studied herself. The reader trusts what she finds in herself because she tells her story in a way that illumines the universal human drama.

A glimpse of the Buddhist worldview

Many schools of Buddhism blossomed after the Buddha died in 543 B.C. E. Over the next thousand years, Buddhism spread across India, and then north and east to Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Scholars generally divide Buddhism into two great streams: Hinayana and Mahayana. Hinayana includes Theravadan Buddhism and what we in the West call Vipassana or Insight Meditation. Mahayana includes Tibetan Buddhism (which is Pilar Jennings' chosen tradition), and most varieties of Chinese, Korean and Japanese Buddhism, including Pure Land and Zen.

Both Hinayana and Mahayana practitioners submit themselves to the guidance of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and to the insights and practices of the Noble Eightfold Path. The goal of a Hinayana Buddhist is to become an *arhat*, someone who has reached Nirvana or total Awakening, by destroying the hindrances of greed, hatred, and delusion. The goal of a Mahayana Buddhist is to become a *bodhisattva*, someone who has come to the brink of Awakening, but who will not pass over into total Enlightenment until all beings can participate in that transformation. Thus, Jennings argues, the Mahayana path is fundamentally about relationship with others. The spiritual journey of every individual is intrinsically connected with the fate of other beings, and, following the Buddha's insight into "emptiness," it is an illusion to think of oneself as a solid, inherently existing self apart from others.

As Jennings explains, Theravadan Buddhism also questions the existence of a solid, enduring self, but in the awakening of the *arhat*, the spotlight is on the individual's personal attainment, not on the participation of all beings. Jennings writes that the "Mahayana path . . . includes the meditation practice so central to the Theravada tradition, and most importantly the work and commitment of the bodhisattva. Through caring deeply for others we begin to recognize the genuine happiness that results when we soften the typically tenacious grip we hold on ourselves at the expense of connection with others" (p. 214). She also notes, "I believe that enlivening human relationship is simultaneously the generator, container, and goal of our awakened being . . . [which is perhaps why] I have been partial to the Mahayana Buddhist path, with its emphasis on achieving enlightenment through caring for others" (p. 230).

Relational psychology after Freud

The *bodhisattva* flavor that runs through Jennings' fine book creates a ready bridge to the American practice of psychoanalysis, at least to those branches of post-Freudian analysis known as object relations and self-psychology. Like the practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism, object relations and self-psychology clinicians understand that human beings are made for relationship.

Jennings is fascinated by the questions: What is a self, and who am I, really? Freud claimed that the self is a mind-body structure that is largely driven and shaped by biological forces within the individual, such as aggression, hatred, sexuality, and the fear of death. A person's self is the product of our struggle to control and integrate our bio-energies within the context of the familial, cultural and sociological influences that surround us. In contrast, object-relations and self-psychology theorists assert that an individual's self is actually formed in the heat of early and emotionally intense interpersonal relationships. Our inmost self is a dynamic "structure" with recognizable characteristics that enjoys duration from one day to the next, and that gradually takes shape within our families of origin.

Jennings explores the work of several post-Freudian analysts -- including Wilfred Bion, D. W. Winnicott, Melanie Klein, W.R.D. Fairbairn, Karen Horney, Christopher Bollas, and Heinz Kohut -- whose clinical work shows that when our early relationships are abandoning, abusive, or traumatic, the damage to our self-structure persists into adulthood, primarily in unconscious ways. This damage causes us to inadvertently and habitually reenact the style and emotional tenor of our earliest relationships. Current interpersonal problems stem from the ways in which our first caregivers related to us. If our caregivers could not receive and welcome in appropriate ways our creative energies or the expression of our desires and anger, then we unconsciously repressed these longings and emotions. To use the Buddhist term, we wounded adults experience an "aversion" to our healthy passions, and then unknowingly manipulate our current relationships in an attempt to control our conscious experience. We involuntarily cling to the wounded self-identity that was forged in childhood, and become attached to a false self that binds us to the dynamics of past relationships. Our unconscious injuries and longings cause us to live in the present as if it were the past.

The healing path of relational psychology

Jennings suggests that the way to wholeness and to the realization of one's true self is through interpersonal relationship, especially a relationship with someone who will not accept our false-self manipulations. This, Jennings suggests, is the way of the object relations and self-psychology analyst, who notices and who helps us to become aware of the ways that we unwittingly re-create the interpersonal dynamics that prevailed with our parents when we were children.

Psychological transformation and maturation are characterized by such processes as transference, counter-transference, and projective identification. A skillful analyst will perceive how the patient's earliest identity was formed and still persists, will help the patient to feel the passions and longings that were repressed, and will respond to the patient in a way that helps him or her to become more self-aware. The goal of such analysis (or relational psychotherapy) is to help the patient to enter with another person into a mutually respectful, compassionate, and creative present moment, and so to become more conscious of who he or she really is. According to Kohut, the wise therapist will be "firm without being hostile, caring without being seductive" (p. 97).

The healing relationship: Tibetan Buddhism

Jennings is fascinated with the analogous healing dyad in Tibetan Buddhism, and she often tells personal stories to illustrate the common threads in her relationship with her analyst and with her lama, Venerable Khenpo Lama Pema Wangdak. Occasionally Jennings supplements her reflections with insights from her practice as an analyst at the Harlem Family Institute (where she works primarily with children), or with sage advice from her Jungian mentor, Ann Ulanov (who is affiliated with the Religion and Psychiatry program at Union Theological Seminary).

American Buddhism is known for the practice of meditation: sitting on a meditation cushion and working silently with a *koan* (a probing question meant to awaken one's mind and authentic self) or simply bringing awareness to the present moment (as in Zen *shikantaza* or in Insight or mindfulness meditation). Jennings has participated in many silent retreats and has learned a great deal from practice on the cushion, but she is most interested in her devotional relationship with Pema Wangdak, whom she trusts completely.

Jennings would be remiss if she did not examine her devotion to Lama Wangdak in psychological terms. Has she idealized her lama? In search of an answer to this question, she examines idealization from the perspectives of psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and Heinz Kohut. Is idealization a kind of denial of and resistance to intimacy (Klein), or is it a necessary dimension of the journey to wholeness (Kohut)? Can it be both? Klein's and Kohut's understanding of idealization does not fully explain the cultural, psychological and spiritual dimensions of what Jennings calls devotion, but she is willing to examine the analytic issues and then to let some questions hang in the air, like *koans*.

Psychoanalysis and Buddhism as complementary paths

The goals and practices of Buddhism and psychoanalysis are quite distinct, but Jennings considers them complementary paths. What psychoanalysis has given her is the ability to reflect on her personal history and her self-image with a non-judgmental "evenly hovering awareness" (Freud). Her analysis has given her a more clear and conscious understanding of how she came to be who she is, a deeper understanding of how her relationship with her parents -- particularly with her Peruvian psychoanalyst mother -- has shaped her identity and how she navigates relationships. Psychoanalysis has helped Jennings to be self-confident and to serve others in the midst of a competitive professional culture.

Buddhist practice has given Jennings a way to bring another, more subtle level of awareness to her memories, thoughts, fears, and longings. It has prepared her to discover compassion and joy in even the darkest experiences. Through her devotional relationship with her lama, she has absorbed his vision of an ultimate reality that is radiant with goodness, no matter what the content of personal experience. Jennings has found a spiritual practice that gives her some inner space, or detachment, from which to reflect on experience as it arises; a practice that lends a kind of iconic transparency to her personal experience so that she can see and empathetically connect with the suffering and joys of others; and a practice that allows her to have a personal self with a unique history and unique traits, gifts and interests -- a self with some durational qualities -- while simultaneously having an identity that is open to surprise, mystery, and the unconscious.

Psychoanalysis supports the blossoming of a real, authentic, and spontaneous self that has clear boundaries and yet is open to intimacy. Buddhist practice supports "no self," an identity that is dynamic, compassionate, permeable, and lightly held.

Jennings tells us that this two-fold identity means that we are not a monadic ego, but rather a

“we-go” whose very subjectivity is woven of relationships. She writes, “The Buddha proposed that our view of others as inherently separate is flawed. As a result, we misperceive things and ourselves as discrete and existing without connection to each other. . . . Yet in the Buddhist teacher/student dyad and in the analytic one, we find ourselves and our relationship to the world around us through union with another. In both relationships there is a reclaiming of lost bits of self and self-experience that come to us after we have projected them onto someone else” (p. 106). Jennings believes that both relational psychology and Mahayana Buddhism posit a true self, or Self, that is “a fluid ever-changing construct, intimately bound in human relationship. . . . In both systems, the “I” that we take at face value is in reality an ever-expanding gathering of others that starts with an essential *we*. We cannot find ourselves, or be ourselves, alone” (p. 106).

Finally, to accentuate the value of combining psychoanalysis and Mahayana Buddhist practice, Jennings dedicates an entire chapter to desire and aggression. Buddha’s writings and the Buddhist tradition hold up certain spiritual goals for all practitioners, whether *arhats* or *bodhisattvas*. The goal is to live as an awakened, compassionate and insightful being whose inner life is permeated with equanimity. Buddhist teachers frequently caution their students about the dangers of desire, anger, and aggression as “poisons” that lead to inner chaos and suffering. Jennings understands the truth of this perspective, but from the analytic perspective, she wants to investigate further. She writes that in some forms of Insight meditation, “students are taught a method of coping with anger that is “cooling” in nature. . . . There is a clear emphasis on remaining in connection with one’s capacity for equanimity” (p. 155). Although this is a helpful practice, Jennings points out that abiding in equanimity at all times has a shadow side: our so-called inner peace may be an attachment that prevents us from experiencing our passions. If we try to avoid experiencing desire, aggression or anger, we may fall into another Buddhist trap: aversion. “Anger and aggression can induce feelings of aversion that cause us to turn away both from the very experience of feeling anger and from the object of our anger. This conditioned response of aversion can leave people locked in unconscious anger and aggression” that can poison our relationships and cause us to bring passive-aggressive qualities to our intimate relationships (pp. 156-157).

Throughout her book, Jennings repeats her warning that sometimes the best of spiritual motives, teachings, and practices can be inadvertently, unconsciously subverted by hidden psychological dynamics.

Critique of contemporary American Buddhism

Jennings recognizes that her view of what is essential to Buddhism (love, relationship, devotion, intimacy) is not a perspective that is shared by all Buddhist teachers in the United States. She writes, “I propose that the effort to define Buddhism as a secular movement as done by Jon Kabat Zinn, Robert Thurman and Stephen Batchelor takes it outside the web of relationship that is the very nucleus of the Dharma” (p. 43). Although Jennings is grateful for her years of practicing the earliest form of Buddhism, variously called Hinayana, Vipassana, Insight Meditation, or mindfulness meditation, she critiques the way that this branch of Buddhism has taken root in the United States.

First, contemporary American forms of mindfulness meditation often reflect the hyper-individualism of the dominant culture. The focus of mindfulness training is too often on “my” mind and “my” practice, without the essential reference to others that the Mahayana tradition brings. Jennings notes that Western students of Buddhism tend to bring to their practice an interest in bolstering the separate self. “In general, I suspect that we Westerners, consciously or not, seek to reify rather than soften our discrete I, or self. . . . Solidly within a dualistic framework

of self versus other, we struggle to integrate a spiritual system that has nondualism at its very heart” (p. 72). Jennings wonders whether many practitioners of mindfulness want to become detached only from their suffering, and to maintain the same self with which they began their study of Buddhism. Their “practice” can thus become a habitual, unconscious rehearsal of a reified identity as a good, compassionate and peaceful Buddhist. When we do this, we miss the deeper implication of the Buddha’s message that what we take to be our solid self is actually a dynamic ever-changing pattern of self-other “selfing” that coheres in a fragile way over time. We also miss the spiritual fact that if we go spelunking into what we take to be our separate selves, we will find all others, the earth, and the whole cosmos.

Jennings also critiques the mindfulness practice of simply *noting* thoughts, feelings, sensations, imaginative images and memories in the flow of consciousness. On the one hand, the power of noting in Vipassana meditation can give us a healthy detachment from habitual inner stories and storylines that are built up as packages of meaning over time, and that do not possess inherent existence. On the other hand, our stories may in fact be significant, and give us access to unconscious feelings. Unconsciously we may even resist becoming aware of certain inner stories and memories, because we don’t want to feel the emotions that bind the stories. As Jennings observes, “mindfulness does not account for the power and potential impact of the unconscious” (p. 156).

Telling our stories to another person, as we do as patients in analysis, and participating in a devotional practice with a genuine spiritual teacher, can give us access to ourselves in ways that the various Hinayana practices of solitary noting simply cannot.

Finally, Jennings also differentiates herself from the noted Buddhist writer Stephen Batchelor, who has discounted belief in something or in a person as an essential Buddhist quality (see his *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Riverhead Books, 1997). She writes that even though “the Buddha hoped to impart to his disciples the strong wish to transform *their own* minds and hearts, he did so with the *belief* [my emphasis] that this transformation would usher in . . . steadfast compassion for others and ethical conduct (p.44). In other words, the Buddha believed that our true nature and destiny as enlightened human beings is to be compassion. Holding this belief can help to guide us -- as it guided him -- to realize this quality of being in ourselves.

One doesn’t get the sense that Jennings judges others harshly for their efforts to secularize Buddhism by adapting it to American culture. She acknowledges that connecting with others more intimately and exploring the unconscious -- tasks that she considers essential in the pilgrimage to no-self -- can be frightening: we need to relinquish what we thought was true, and who we thought we were. But the reward is enlightenment.

Jennings values the fact that psychoanalysis can deepen and strengthen our conscious, personal identity. She also welcomes the more permeable boundaries of no-self that are revealed in Buddhist practice. Most intriguing of all, she is convinced these apparent opposites can be reconciled within one person. Thankfully, she is more interested in calling us forward to this integrated vision of human identity than she is in criticizing others.

An analogous Christian path to a relational Self

As a Christian psychologist, I am thrilled to read *Mixing Minds* because I see many areas of resonance between Jennings’ work and my own. Buddhism posits a “two truths” identity: we have our everyday or relative identity that we employ in interpersonal relationships (self with a small ‘s’), and an

absolute or ultimate identity, a deep personal Self (with a capital 'S') that is transparent to a universal subjective dimension. This Mayahana Buddhist view of Self echoes that of Christian contemplatives such as Thomas Merton, who often spoke about a distinction between a false self and a true Self. Merton's vision is rooted in Christian Scripture, especially the Gospel of John and the Epistles of St. Paul, where we are put on notice that by surrendering our ordinary ego to God, we discover that we "have the mind of Christ" (Corinthians 2:16, Philippians 2: 5ff). Eventually we may be able to say with St. Paul, "Now not I, but Christ in me" (Galatians 2:20). This new center of "I" is the "new creation" that St. Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15.

Merton understood Christ to be the archetype of one who now lives from the same universal wellspring of personhood exemplified by the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Merton was not a psychologist, but one can imagine that he would agree with the belief that our deep, true Self is something like what Jennings calls "a we-go" instead of an ego. Jesus articulates this perspective most fully in the Gospel of John. In the Farewell Address (chapters 14-17), Jesus says that his deepest, truest identity is a relationship with God, whom he calls "Father." His is a relational "I-Thou" identity, one whose love and joy he wants to share with others. So, he declares, "know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20); "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11) In the depths of Jesus' God-given, universal or Christ identity, he declares to God, "All mine are yours, and yours are mine" (John 17:10), and he asks God to protect his friends, "so that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (John 17:21). It is easy to see a resonance between this Christ identity of John's Gospel and the Mahayana Buddhist no-self, a Self that lives as a bodhisattva, for the sake of others. This no-self of Buddhism and the "not I" of St. Paul puts all creatures on the same level of mutual love and care.

Jennings speaks about a no-self as a sense of Self in which one's personal identity becomes essentially relational and transparent to the sufferings and joys of others. That this relational identity is timeless and suffused with compassion and love is an insight that psychoanalysis is not prepared to reveal. However, it is a teaching that is transmitted by both Buddhism and Christianity.

As a friend and biographer of the late Roman Catholic priest and writer, Henri Nouwen, I have often highlighted his encouragement to Christians to "find the Universal within the personal" (Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, February 23, HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) Henri did this by emphasizing that Jesus' journey is our journey. Just as Jesus had to suffer on the cross, so, too, each of us must bear the cross of our own lives, with its particular darkness and light. If we can learn to bear the whole history of our lives within the embrace of God, we will find all creation within ourselves. From this Christ identity within us, we will find ourselves in an I-Thou relationship with all creation. And this realization will lead to true happiness, joy and love. A transformed consciousness blossoms into a life devoted to mercy, reconciliation, forgiveness, justice-seeking, and peace-making. Just so, says Jennings, from her Tibetan Buddhist perspective.

Further questions

Jennings' work opens up many issues that she could not address in one book, questions that we hope she will take up in future work. For example, when we acknowledge that we have an unconscious -- as we discover in psychoanalysis -- we allow for some unknown in our identity, and a freedom to be someone that we don't yet know. Could this openness to the psychological unknown be related to the sense of mystery that many spiritual paths talk about? After all, allowing for unconscious memories, wishes, and motivations in ourselves may help us to realize that other people are in a similar situation



-- that they, too, are more than they know in their conscious minds and are more than our caricature of who they are. This realization may evoke a curiosity about myself and others, and a desire to listen more closely and accurately to what I perceive in them, and in myself. “Who am I?” and “Who are you?” become open-ended questions in our quest for truth. When we invite such questions to become an abiding part of our knowing, are we not cultivating a spiritual quality of being?

Those of us on the Christian contemplative journey often study the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, and others who perceive a horizon of unknowing. The medieval book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, expresses this sense that human beings stand at the brink of a vast Unknown, because Creation is the work of an infinite intelligence that permeates the cosmos. A sense of awe arises in the presence of infinite unknowability and mystery. Thus, there is a similarity between acknowledging one’s own unconscious -- that there are things about myself that are real, but unknown -- and allowing reality itself to have a dimension of sacred Unknownness. In Christianity, the symbolic statement that captures this idea is that God is the Uncreated, and because we are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), we have a dimension of unknowability within our very selves. Since we participate in God’s infinite being, we can never fully fathom ourselves. This dimension is known as *apophatic* (Greek, without images) or negative theology (we can only know what God is *not*). No thought, image, story, sound, or sensation can capture the mystery of God -- or ourselves. As humans, we participate in the dynamic dance of knowing and unknowing that has its source in God.

Jennings’ delicate, experiential exploration of our innermost identities in relationship reveals questions that go beyond psychoanalysis and Buddhism, and that address some of the most critical issues in interfaith dialogue. *Mixing Minds* is rich with material that will be mined for years to come by everyone interested in spirituality and psychotherapy. We look forward to more writing from the keyboard of this gifted analyst and Buddhist, Pilar Jennings.

