

**Mindful Therapy:  
A Guide for Therapists and  
Helping Professionals**

Thomas Bien

Wisdom Publications, Inc., 199  
Elm Street, Somerville MA 02144,  
USA. Website: [www.wisdompubs.org](http://www.wisdompubs.org).  
2006. xviii + 273 pp. \$17.95. PB. ISBN  
9780861712922.

The task of a talk-therapist within the Buddhist tradition(s) should be to make a patient rise above doctrines aka *fixations*, to make certain that the caregiver is a good listener and the patient finally sees the transitoriness of all things including the flow of time. In classical psychotherapy the stress is on seeing the self in the process of being actualised. There is a fixed target in practising psychotherapy in the West; generally, the control and not always, the cure of mental diseases. The aim is to make the patient euthymic, flat affect is often acceptable over aggression and the implied target is restoring some *quality of life* to the patient. Within Buddhist psychology these targets are subsumed by the journey to nirvana. Why should anyone howsoever mentally ill not have a chance to experience Buddhahood in the here and the now?

Bien's book makes the way to Buddhahood a little easier. Bien's book does not discard modern science regarding brain anomalies, various established talk-therapies, or classical psychoanalysis while reframing the cures of the psychic apparatus within Buddhist matrices and at the same time is intended to be used by practising therapists since 'Therapy is not easy work. If [one is] a psychotherapist, a counsellor, or anyone who routinely seeks to relieve suffering in others through any of the arts involving deep listening and true presence ... [then one is] part of a long line of healers and shamans, of gurus and bodhisattvas stretching back to the beginning of human history and even earlier still' (3). In the section *Science is not Enough* (5–8), Bien establishes the need for scientific rigour while caring for patients: 'While it is necessary that we claim our role as spiritual teachers and healers, we also need a way to fulfill that role, a way that feels possible, practical, and

human-sized. ... We require a vision for our psychotherapy practice that is at the same time lofty and practical, head in the clouds, perhaps, but feet firmly on the ground' (7–8).

While Bien will go on to discuss Buddhist psychology he will not discard the findings of say, Carl Rogers, whose views on loving-compassion are 'accurate empathy' (134) as the Buddhists would define *karuna*, compassion. It is this loving-compassion which Bien insists must be found in mental healthcare professionals: 'If therapy is a real human encounter, *of course* ... [the therapist] will think about ... [her or his] patients from time to time [outside of therapeutic sessions]' (135). But for those who obsess with their patients, Bien sees a real problem: they need to 'cultivate equanimity' (ibid.). To those who question the need of some people to become therapists, Bien has this to say; and what a wonderful way to see the instinctive urge to help others:

How fortunate we are to have work that involves the practice of love and compassion! How different it is, for example, from the commodities broker on the floor of the exchange, a phone in each ear, yelling and gesticulating, face contorted with stress. People who work in difficult jobs involving aggressive competition during the day will be more exhausted by it than a therapist who cultivates love and compassion by means of understanding toward herself and her patients all day long (136).

Bien humanises the talk-therapies as he does the caregiver and patient dyad. Who would have thought that being a talk-therapist was a form of Buddhist practise in mindfulness? Those of us who are trained to help others in the latter's journey towards *mukti* or nirvana will find great solace in this book, especially in the second part, *Buddha as Therapist*. There Bien has practical counsel for therapists: 'Before the start of your work day, review the patients you will see that day. Imagine life from their perspective, what it feels like to be them. ... Spend a little time meditating on each patient' (65). It is refreshing that Bien deals with the thorny issue of a therapist's fee in this book and connects session-fees to the patient's 'preoccupation with money' and the latter's failure to

understand that ‘anyone could earn money from working with him and care about him at the same time’ (ibid.).

This reviewer has been in the profession of helping people recover from mental trauma and finds that most people find paying fees for their sessions akin to simony. But therapists need to earn their living while remaining sane; therefore, this book is a must read handbook for therapists. We will now turn to Bien’s treatment of the psychic apparatus. This has to be interrogated to see where he differs from classical and accepted constructions of the mind. Before we proceed to that, I am heartened to see that through all Bien’s constructions of the mind according to Buddhist metaphysics he is solidly grounded in modern science as has been mentioned earlier in this review: ‘Hostility triggers the release of the hormones epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol, and for men, testosterone. Testosterone and cortisol in turn trigger the creation of cholesterol. Anger also triggers high blood pressure and poor digestion’ (255). Bien refers and more importantly, accepts contemporary researchers.

Without his claims being empirically sustainable within scientific literature and the experience of being a therapist, he would just be speculating and this book would be another useless scholarly effort at armchair philosophising about the mind. Practical talk-therapy has little to do with epistemology but everything to do with calming a person with diagnosed drug-resistant schizophrenia. If we neglect the empirical orientation of Bien and first do not prove that he is a scientist, his advocacy of Buddhist theories about the mind will not hold water in today’s rapidly progressing field of psychiatric pharmacology. The following paragraph is unique in the vast literature on schizophrenia: ‘Perhaps the new theories about schizophrenia are more correct. It would certainly be difficult to deny the utility of antipsychotic medication, for example. But we should in no event be fooled into believing that people in times past were less intelligent than we are because they lacked MRIs or electron microscopes. And just because we have a new kind of evidence does not necessarily mean the old evidence is invalid’ (111).

Bien shows elsewhere in this book how classical psychoanalysis has not been proved entirely wrong in spite of better understanding of the brain in positing that the Father figure’s absence contributes to the development of schizophrenia. This long discussion about Bien’s scientific moorings is necessary to ensure that he is not normatively discarded for being / as a Buddhist psychologist. He is a psychologist who has found value in the teachings of the Buddha. In no way is his scientific credibility reduced by his rigorous interrogation and espousal of Buddhist therapy which is rooted in the Zen praxis of mindfulness.

*Working with Emotion: Buddhist Psychology* (189–211) is an antidote to the emphasis on the libidinal in classical psychoanalysis with its horizontal divisions of the mind as being primarily regulated by the Pleasure Principle, popularly known as the *Id*. This emphasis on repression and the Pleasure Principle robs a person of volition and agency. It is as if whatever we do is beyond our control; there can be no mindfulness within classical psychoanalysis since the mind imagined vertically is constituted of mostly the Unconscious. Only through Freudian slips and *dream work* can we know our true natures. And our true natures according to Freud and his disciples are unspeakable and there is nothing within us except the muck of desires, which are not really muck according to psychoanalysts! For a discussion on this see Elizabeth Wright, *Speaking Desires Can Be Dangerous: The Poetics of the Unconscious* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999). Bien corrects this: in this entire chapter he makes a case for the mind according to one of the three authoritative Buddhist texts, the *Abhidharma-pitaka*. A student of psychology or even a psychiatrist should study Bien’s presentation of the *Abhidharma-pitaka*’s construction of the mental machinery to seek solutions to mental diseases not only in childhood or within Locke’s theories of the tabula rasa but what is known as *bija* within Buddhism and *samskaras* within Hinduism.

The book has ample real-life case histories and thus makes the talk-therapies humane. If one were to read anyone from the *Tel Quel* group one would think that the talk-therapies were just mere theorising. The Buddha’s aim was to end

suffering and the aim of the psychotherapist is the same—this simple fact gives more credibility to Bien’s project than the tortuous writings of those whose entire lives are spent in analysing Freud and Jung in classrooms and seminars. It is difficult to cure a person; let alone to help that person reach *insight*. Then how difficult it must be to lead both the therapist and the patient both through and to mindfulness and then to the cessation of suffering? This book has practical implications for those helping others. This reviewer recently had a young lady confide to him that she is afraid of water and finds meaning in disjointed events—likes shadows, images of gods and goddesses, and the like. My training teaches me to tease out the childhood events of this person and label her as an obsessive-psychotic. In fact, I tried to locate her fears to some childhood sexual trauma. There were none and the lady was slightly discomfited when I tried to ask her about her intimate experiences. The transference and counter-transference mechanism was hindered in the process.

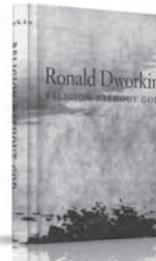
Bien forces me to rethink her condition in the light of Buddhist psychology and if I can see things in the light of Buddhism, why should I not think of what say, Hinduism, specifically the Tantras have to say about phobias? Where Bien stresses the annihilation of greed and anger and the lower passions; other talk-therapists of repute revel in encouraging the darkness in our hearts to have unbridled sway over us. The Bhagavadgita warned us much before the Buddha to control our minds; today’s psychoanalysts will pooh-poo the Gita as repressive. It is fine for Bien to locate mindfulness within Buddhism but he should have been a more careful researcher and ought to have pointed out that most of his exercises for therapists given in this book have their origins within Hindu canons. Bien’s otherwise excellent book does not even passingly mention the debt that Buddhist psychology owes to Hindu texts, including the *agamas* and the *nigamas*. Buddhist psychology derives from Hindu psychology. Three other points need to be mentioned, Bien has no control group to show the efficacy of Buddhist talk-therapy over other established therapies. Neither does he take into account the fact

that empirical research shows that meditation and the practice of mindfulness during the onset or the course of a psychiatric illness worsens the condition and thus should not be used while the patient is non-euthymic. Further, if Bien had clearly defined Buddhism, it would have helped us in locating his book within one or the other of the Buddhist traditions of mindfulness. Also it is disconcerting that nowhere is the great Vasubandhu (circa 4th to 5th century CE), that skilled Buddhist psychotherapist, explicitly mentioned within this book.

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### **Religion Without God**

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Harvard University Press, 79 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA.  
2013. ix + 180 pp. \$ 17.95. HB. ISBN 9780674726826.

**I**n this collection of the Einstein Lectures delivered by the author at the University of Bern in December 2011, we find succinct and striking arguments that try to distinguish the debates on God from those on religion. Dworkin points out the religiosity prevalent in science and situates atheism also as ‘religious’. He questions the reason in associating the ‘minor premise’ (26) of a God with values. He argues how the beauty, unity, and symmetry of the universe are accepted by both science and religion. He delves into the constitutional and legal challenges of religious freedom and how such freedom can challenge many social values: ‘If we are to limit the protection of religious belief to godly religion, we must find our justification not in the science department of orthodox religions but rather in their other department, in the values they sponsor’ (113). This book is a small dart that has hit on the bull’s eye of the problematic of religion and god and should be read by anyone who believes or prefers not to.

*Editor*

Prabuddha Bharata