

JACK ENGLER

THERE IS A DISCOVERY we Western practitioners of Buddhism have come to, somewhat reluctantly, as we have gained more experience in practice, particularly meditation practice. What first drew us, and may continue to draw us, was Buddhism's promise of liberation from suffering, and from the painful sense of incompleteness and limited satisfaction in life. And most of us were not disappointed. We did find a path and a liberation in Buddha-dharma that we have not found anywhere else. That is why we continue to practice. But as time has gone on, we have discovered something else about practice: it is not immune from our personal history, our character, our inner conflicts, and our defensive styles. Just as with psychotherapy and other healing interventions, we are learning that *vipassanā*, *zazen*, *nundro*, *tong-len*, *mettā*—the whole range of Buddhist practices, in fact—can be undertaken in ways that are directly opposed to their purpose and design. This most radical agent for personal transformation can be used unwittingly to prevent genuine transformation—to avoid our issues, while making it look like, and feel like, we're addressing them—and so perpetuate our suffering instead of liberating us from it. This has been an unwelcome and disconcerting discovery. We started out thinking that spiritual practice would dissolve all our emotional problems. Perhaps this was typical Western hubris or naïveté, our inveterate belief in human perfectibility and the right to happiness. But at the same time, it has forced us to become much more sophisticated about how we practice, about motivations behind practice, and about discerning what practice can do and what it can't.

The psychoanalyst Robert Langs wrote a fascinating little book some years ago entitled *Rating Your Psychotherapist*.¹ His basic assumption flies in the face of common sense. It says that you cannot rate your therapist by any scheme that relies on conscious, rational appraisal—the usual kind of

commonsense assessment. This is because our conscious mind just wants relief; we just want to feel better. This part of us isn't very interested in doing the hard work of coming to know ourselves and genuinely facing our issues—in fact, we would rather avoid it if we could. Further, the part of us that just wants relief, as Langs saw it, will tend to collude with that part of us that retains, unconsciously, a memory of every significant hurt we've ever suffered. That part of our unconscious is interested only in survival and in avoiding retraumatization. Now, there is a still deeper part of us, also unconscious, call it our wisdom mind, that always knows the emotional truth of every situation and cannot deceive or be deceived. This part of us always pushes toward full conscious awareness. But our conscious desire for relief at any cost, and our unconscious fear of retraumatization, tend to gang up on and repress the part of us that knows the truth and wants to know it in full awareness.

Langs's radical conclusion is that we can rate our therapists only by accessing our unconscious perception of them. I wonder if this isn't the case with spiritual teachers as well. The point is that we have a deeply ambivalent attitude toward any process of change. In Langs's phrase, we enter upon it with a "mind divided." Part of us wants to know, part of us doesn't. Part of us wants to change, part of us is deeply frightened at the prospect of change and will often settle for the illusion of change instead of the real thing.

The part of us we might call the ego—the part that is willing to settle for the devil we know rather than risk the devil we don't—can use practice for its own advantage. It's just as well we are forewarned of its machinations—though the ego, clever as it is, can take this same forewarning and use it to protect itself: "See, I told you it was going to be difficult. Why don't you wait until you feel better before engaging in serious practice?" There is something analogous in traditional Asian Buddhism—a way of thinking about the goal of practice which the anthropologist Melford Spiro termed "karmatic Buddhism": the practitioner decides that the goal of liberation in this very life is unattainable and tries instead to do meritorious works that will lead to a better rebirth. With a better rebirth, one might then be able to practice for liberation. This is both sincerely meant and an acceptable position to take in Asian Buddhism, where life circumstances may actually not be supportive of practice. But waiting for a better rebirth, like waiting until you feel better, can rationalize avoidance of the hard work of change.

This is remarkable when you think about it: Without being aware of it,

we can use a practice designed to liberate us from ego to shore up ego. But is this really surprising? Have you ever found anything in your life that you couldn't—or haven't—conscripted into the service of your own neuroses? I did this at the very beginning of Buddhist practice with the way part of me responded to hearing the First Noble Truth—the truth of suffering. My conscious reaction, and a genuine and accurate one as far as it went, was "Thank God, someone is finally telling it like it is!" "Suffering" fit the ego's need for a perfect explanation of life's ills and offered a neat remedy. My mother's favorite word was "perfect." There was no place for imperfection or unhappiness in her worldview or in our home. It took many years in therapy before I understood a deeper and darker resonance with the Truth of Suffering: my mother's and my own pleasure in suffering, because it provided leverage and power and expiated guilt. Without awareness of these unconscious motives and meanings, the First Noble Truth legitimated and perpetuated neurotic needs for a long time.

It's just that we'd like to believe spiritual practice is the exception. We want to be assured that there is at least one path that we can't screw up, that is immune from our capacity for self-deception and self-sabotage, some practice we can just do and be assured it will "work." The fact seems to be that there isn't. There's no way to practice meditation or any spiritual path that is immune from the anxieties, needs, belief structures, emotional patterns, or dynamics of our own personal history and our own character. At the end of the day, we still have to work with sides of ourselves we perhaps hoped spiritual practice would make unnecessary.

Phillip Kapleau relates this exchange with a student during a question-and-answer session in a Zen workshop:²

QUESTIONER: But doesn't enlightenment clear away imperfections and personality flaws?

ROSHI: No, it shows them up! Before awakening, one can easily ignore or rationalize his shortcomings, but after enlightenment this is no longer possible. One's failings are painfully evident. Yet at the time a strong determination develops to rid oneself of them. Even opening the Mind's eye fully does not at one fell swoop purify the emotions. Continuous training after enlightenment is required to purify the emotions so that our behavior

accords with our understanding. This vital point must be understood.

This is not what the student wanted to hear. He desperately hoped that becoming enlightened, experiencing *kenshō*, would solve all his personal problems and doubts.

The enlightenment traditions often seem to promise this. In an interview for the spring 2001 issue of his journal *What Is Enlightenment?*, devoted to the question "What is Ego?," Andrew Cohen asked me, "Don't you agree that if one's enlightenment is deep enough, wouldn't the fixation on the personal self and all the suffering associated with it disappear because one's perspective would shift completely—from seeing oneself as the one who was wounded to recognizing oneself to be that which was never wounded by anything? Won't realization of the emptiness and ultimate insubstantiality of the personal self and its suffering completely change one's relationship to personal experience?" My reply was that this is an idealized view. In practice, it just doesn't seem to work that way.

The radical change Cohen foresaw happens only when one has truly gone to the end of the path and can then say with all buddhas, "The holy life has been lived. What needed to be done has been done." In the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, for instance, freedom from self-generated suffering doesn't happen all at once. It occurs by stages or increments. The entire group of unwholesome mental factors (*samyojanas*, or "fetters," so called because they bind one to the wheel of life and death) that produce suffering are not extinguished all at once. Rather, four different clusters of these factors are extinguished sequentially in four separate enlightenment experiences.³ The first cluster has to do with mistaken beliefs, the second and third with unwholesome affects and motivations, and the fourth with narcissistic attachments to self. Along the way, much work remains. In Western experience, some of that work must be personal work. As Kapleau's reply suggests, it isn't simply a matter of applying spiritual insight to the rest of one's life. Yet if the "continuous training" that he says is necessary after initial enlightenment is just more spiritual practice—more sitting, more retreats, more meditation—then that can leave one's character flaws and personal conflicts and difficulties untouched.

I want to suggest several reasons for this.

One is that we cannot help but assimilate our approach to Buddhist

practice into our preexisting emotional patterns, some of which are inevitably maladaptive. Assimilation is inevitable. It unavoidably affects not only our work and relationships but the way we understand, practice, and experience Buddhist teaching. This is one answer to the question Harvey Aronson asks in his excellent book *Buddhist Practice on Western Ground*: "Why is it that meditation in the absence of psychotherapy or personal work does not prevent or reduce mental anguish for some people?"⁴

A second reason why personal work is often necessary is that awareness in one area of life doesn't automatically transfer into other areas. Spiritual awareness, as Buddhism defines it, doesn't automatically yield psychological and emotional awareness in a Western sense. The profound need to defend against retraumatization, as well as our capacity for horizontal and vertical splits in personality, leave sequestered compartments where the memories of past injury and the anticipation of future hurt are deepest. Entrenched characterological defenses and flaws can remain untouched. So, for instance, we encounter teachers who have deep insight into the nature of self and reality, but who encourage dependent guru-disciple relationships with students, at worst sleep with them, need uncritical admiration, are intolerant of criticism or dissent, or insist on a rigidly hierarchical structure in their community. Or more simply, we encounter teachers who are powerful in the front of a zendo but can be anxious, confused, immature, or at worse violate boundaries and take advantage of their students.

In the inaugural conference I moderated at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies between teachers from different Buddhist traditions, a recently disrobed Tibetan lama admitted, quite courageously, that although he had no difficulty generating compassion toward the "thousand beings of light" in traditional Tibetan visualization practice, he found it much more difficult, now that he was no longer a monk, to deal with the real person in front of him.

Jack Kornfield writes in *A Path with Heart*, "Only a deep attention to the whole of our life can bring us the capacity to love well and live freely. . . . If our spiritual practice does not enable us to function wisely, to love and work and connect with the whole of our life, then we must include forms of practice that heal our problems in other ways."⁵ And in fact, in Buddhist societies this has always been the case. One never took every problem in love and work to the spiritual teacher.

The psychological self also seems to be a much more individualistic

concept in the West than in traditional Buddhist societies. It is much less embedded for us in a preexisting social and cultural matrix that defines and supports it. Therefore, practice also seems to unfold differently for Western practitioners. This is a whole topic and issue in itself, and I cannot do more than suggest it here. But let me share several observations.

First, even in spiritual practice, the need to deal with emotional and relational issues seems to be more the rule for Westerners than the exception. Practice itself tends to uncover personal issues for us by holding a mirror to our mind. But uncovering these issues in meditation doesn't automatically bring insight in a psychodynamic sense. It may for some, but this depends on how psychologically minded you are, on how much you have worked with this kind of material in the past, on how your teacher responds to it, and most important, on whether you yourself choose to work with it. The classical meditation traditions themselves discourage working with what they refer to as "mental content."

Two vignettes: Among the Buddhist vipassanā practitioners I interviewed in India, those who had experienced at least the first stage of enlightenment were noteworthy for the absence of personal content when they described their meditation practice. The kind of material that surfaces for Western students was simply not reported. This raises several important questions. Was it that personal issues simply didn't come up? If not, why not? Did this have to do with the way the practice was taught? Were personal issues considered so insignificant compared to the experience of enlightenment, for instance, that they didn't deserve much mention? Or did they not come up because of a different, less individuated, sense of self?

A second vignette: In the course of my study in India, I had the good fortune to do intensive practice with the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw at his meditation center in Rangoon. He was the root teacher of this tradition of *satipaṭṭhāna-vipassanā* and the most venerated monk, scholar, and meditation master in Theravada Buddhism. By the third day, the senior sayadaw (teacher) taking my daily report of practice was asking me, "Have you seen the great light yet?" This is a very advanced stage of practice—the fourth *ñāna*, in the classical "stages of insight." Apparently he thought three days were sufficient to get there!

In her wonderful little biography of the Buddha, Karen Armstrong points out how little the scriptures tell us of the Buddha as a person. "They tell us next to nothing of his personality, for instance. We know more about the

person of Ananda than about his teacher. It is as if the personality of one who has awakened is not only unimportant but has disappeared.

But whether explicitly worked with or not, practice for Westerners will more often than not access personal material long before there is any experience of the great light. Jack Kornfield found the same thing Dan Brown and I did ten years earlier in a Rorschach study of vipassanā meditators before and after a three-month retreat.⁷ About half the practitioners found it hard to sustain mindfulness practice in its pure form because they encountered so much unresolved grief, fear, wounding, and unfinished developmental business with parents, siblings, friends, spouses, children, and others. Trying to get them to redirect their attention to note simple arising and passing away is usually unsuccessful. The press of personal issues is just too great. Even advanced Western students find that periods of powerful practice and deep insight will often be followed by periods in which they reencounter painful patterns, fears, and conflicts. Or they may come to some important understanding and balance in formal practice but find that, when they return home to the problems of day-to-day living, relationships, and career, old neurotic or dysfunctional patterns of behavior are as strong as ever and have to be faced. If they do not face them, there is a good likelihood they will unconsciously use their practice to avoid dealing with them. And if that happens, their practice itself will eventually become dry or sterile and increasingly unrewarding. Emotional issues that aren't addressed can infuse daily meditation practice with anxiety, agitation, discomfort, or dullness.

Second, we continue to find that many of these personal issues aren't healed simply by more meditation or other forms of spiritual practice alone. Specific problems such as early abuse, addiction, conflicts in love and sexuality, depression, struggles with aggression and the expression of anger, problematic personality traits, and certainly mental illness all require specific attention, and probably ongoing personal, professional, and communal support to resolve. This is particularly true of issues around trust and intimacy in relationships. These issues can't be resolved simply by watching the moment-to-moment flow of thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the mind. These problems arise in relationships; they have to be healed in relationships.

In 1980, in the course of a retreat in Yucca Valley during the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw's only visit to the United States, Jack Kornfield, in his intrepid way, asked the sayadaw in a teachers' meeting, "What do you do

when students bring psychological problems?" There was a hurried conference between the sayadaws. The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw turned back to face the Western teachers: "What psychological problems?" he asked. In one of his last talks before leaving the United States, the sayadaw said he had discovered a new form of dukkha called "psychological suffering."

The wish that spiritual practice could, by itself, prove a panacea for all psychic suffering is widespread and understandable. But unfortunately it prevents teachers and students from making use of other resources. Worse, students are sometimes led to believe that if they encounter difficulties, it's because they haven't practiced long enough or they haven't been practicing correctly or wholeheartedly enough. The message too often is that the problem is in the quality of the student's practice, rather than in the mistaken assumption that practice should cure all.

Also, not everyone is capable or ready to devote themselves exclusively to spiritual practice, or to pursue it single-mindedly to its depth. If they try to force themselves, or if teachers push too hard, there is a risk of serious disorganization, decompensation, regression, or loss of function. Most will simply give up, but then may carry the burden of shame and guilt for "failing." Others will get discouraged and quit, giving up a practice and a community that could have been immensely helpful to them.

Third, when basic developmental tasks are neglected or remain largely unfinished, Western students often find it difficult to deepen their practice beyond a certain point. They start to have problems focusing and concentrating. They become irritated and discontent with practice. "Under these circumstances," Harvey Aronson observes, "attempts at barreling through, toughing it out, or just practicing more can lead to derailment."⁸ Students stop bringing practice into daily life.

Arnold Toynbee's dictum seems to apply in spiritual life as well, at least for Westerners: those who don't remember history are compelled to repeat it. If personal conflictual patterns, of whatever origin, aren't consciously faced and worked with, they continue to repeat in practitioners and their communities. As Jack Kornfield writes, "The need to reclaim and develop a healthy sense of self and self-esteem, a capacity for intimacy, and a creative and fulfilling way to live in the world can't be and shouldn't be separated from spiritual practice."⁹ The Buddhist teaching that I neither have nor am an enduring self should not be taken to mean that I do not need to struggle to find out who I am, what my desires and aspirations are, what my needs

are, what my capabilities and responsibilities are, how I am relating to others, and what I could or should do with my life. Ontological emptiness does not mean psychological emptiness.

In his great sixth-century compendium of classical Theravada Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and practice, Buddhaghosa called practice a *visuddhimagga* or "path of purification." Practice is like refining an alloy in fire until the impurities are burned away, leaving the pure metal. He was pointing out, in less psychological language than ours, that we bring a mixture of motivations to practice. Some are healthy: to genuinely see, know, and deeply understand ourselves; to change for the better; to be more kind and compassionate. And there is the most simple and fundamental of all human desires: the desire to be happy and free from suffering, along with the desire that others likewise be happy.

But these healthy motives are typically interlaced with one or more other motivations, other meanings practice can have for us, which reflect our fear of change, our fear of freedom, and our grasping at self to allay our anxiety. Some of these motives and meanings are idiosyncratic, rooted in personal history—the kind of preexisting emotional patterns Harvey Aronson pointed to. But others are more universal, and these underlie the attraction Eastern forms of spiritual practice have for many Westerners.¹⁰ They also predispose us to employ practices like meditation in the service of defense, rather than self-awareness. We need to be aware of them, not as personal faults or failings, but as the irreducible "impurities" that need to be refined in the fire of practice. I want to say a few words about these ten unhealthy motivations.

1. *A quest for perfection and invulnerability.* Enlightenment can be imagined as a heaven-sent embodiment of a core Western narcissistic ideal: a state of personal perfection from which all our badness, all our faults and defilements, have been expelled, a state in which we will finally become self-sufficient, not needing anyone or anything, above criticism and reproach, and above all, immune to further hurts or disappointments. Practice can be motivated in part by this secret wish to be special, if not superior: enlightenment will finally elicit the acknowledgment and admiration that have been lacking. Because narcissistic issues are so pervasive in character development and across every level functioning, this is usually the most important of the ten issues.

2. *A fear of individuation.* Fears, conflicts, and felt doubts and deficiencies—around assuming responsibility, being assertive and competent, living our own life and making our own choices—can be avoided through a defensive pursuit of an idealized “egolessness” or “selflessness.”

3. *Avoidance of responsibility and accountability.* The Buddhist goal of freeing oneself from egocentric needs and desires can rationalize our avoidance of anxiety-producing situations: making decisions, accepting responsibility for them, and taking charge of our life.

4. *Fear of intimacy and closeness.* A stance of “nonattachment” can rationalize fears of closeness and the anxieties associated with intimacy: fear of feeling exposed, vulnerable, humiliated, shamed, hurt, rejected, or abandoned. It can rationalize feelings of estrangement and loneliness. It can absolve us from fears and conflicts over sexuality.

5. *A substitute for grief and mourning.* Significant personal loss often brings people into practice, but practice itself can be used defensively to avoid the personal issues and feelings associated with real loss. Mindfulness can be practiced in a way that either dissociates the important affects of mourning—anger, confusion, withdrawal, sadness—or acknowledges them only from a safe distance. Or they can be neutralized through escape into no-self. The longing for reunion with the loved one can be displaced onto the quest for mystical oneness and union.

6. *Avoidance of feelings.* The labeling of aversive emotions as “defilements” or “unwholesome” in Buddhist practice can lead to thinking the goal is not to feel any disturbing emotion, and then feeling guilty if you do. Western practitioners often have a problem with anger and its derivatives. An earnest and sincere Vajrayana student started therapy with me with the request that I help him get rid of his anger, that is, collude with his attempt to avoid facing it.

7. *Passivity and dependence.* Fear and denial of anger, competitiveness, and self-assertion (often masked by a passive-dependent or passive-aggressive style) can be mistakenly viewed as the practice of egolessness and detachment from personal desire. Passivity can also be used to rationalize the fear of disagreeing or taking an independent stance. Codependency can be mistakenly seen as compassionate service.

8. *Self-punitive guilt.* Desirelessness and nonattachment can become the arena for acting out underlying feelings of unworthiness and guilt, as well as super-ego needs for punishment. “Needs are bad, and I’m bad for having them.”

9. *Devaluing of reason and intellect.* The emphasis on immediate, nonverbal experience in meditation, and the axiom that “those who speak do not know, those who know do not speak,” can justify the histrionic defense of “having experiences” without reflecting on their meanings. It can also seem to promise resolution of obsessional rumination by saying, “Don’t think,” and thereby reinforce the defensive avoidance of thinking to block self-understanding. On the contrary, “Do not dislike even the world of senses and ideas,” the *Hsinhsin ming* (Song of Faith) says, and “Indeed, to accept them fully is identical with true enlightenment.”¹¹

10. *Escape from intrapsychic experience.* By trying to “let go” of all aspects of psychological selfhood, we can justify the suppression or repression of anything that arouses anxiety or insecurity, and anything that may stimulate self-awareness. States of samādhi that have the power to suppress perception, thinking, imagery, and aversive emotions can be used to keep the mind relatively free of unwanted thoughts and feelings, substituting “bliss” instead.

One or more of these motives can continue to influence us for a long time. Traditional Buddhist Abhidhamma explains the process of spiritual growth in terms of what Western psychology calls the principle of reciprocal inhibition: opposing wholesome and unwholesome mental factors cannot arise in the same state of consciousness. Anger and loving-kindness cannot arise together. Generosity and selfishness cannot be present in the mind at the same time. But reciprocal inhibition cannot explain or account for this mix of motivations and meanings that Western students bring to and encounter in practice. This requires another principle of mental functioning that Western psychology has called attention to and sees as central to mental and emotional life: the principle of multiple determination. This principle states that all action, all behavior, is determined by multiple motives, that we often have different and opposing reasons for doing what we do, some conscious, some unconscious: that we can be loving, for instance, and at the same time very angry, and our loving is a defense, a reaction formation against feelings of anger that are too unacceptable or dangerous to feel. The principle of multiple determination also involves a recognition that some of our motives for a given action will be conscious, and others will be unconscious—outside conscious awareness, but influencing volition, choice, affect, mood, and the meaning of our behavior nonetheless. Multiple determination helps us to understand that our unconscious motives can be in conflict with our

conscious ones—or even in conflict with other unconscious motivations and meanings.

Spiritual practice, of whatever kind, is not exempt from this law of multiple determination. It is noteworthy that Buddhist psychology, at least as formulated in the Abhidhamma, does not seem to have a theory of intrapsychic conflict and resistance in a psychodynamic sense. The paradigm of the Five Hindrances to practice is the closest it comes. These are mental factors that are considered particular obstacles to practice: sense desire, anger, boredom (traditionally, “sloth and torpor”), worry and agitation, and skeptical doubt. They could be read as “resistances,” and they often function that way in actual practice: sense desire or sexual attraction, for instance, can distract from or defend against self-realization or insight. But at this existential level of experience, what is defended against is not insight into personal motives and emotional patterns but insight into the three “marks” of phenomenal existence: unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and insubstantiality. However, this is not resistance in a psychodynamic sense, and it is not at this existential level that most Western practitioners first encounter resistance. Without an understanding of multiple determination and the resistance that ensues, it is difficult to understand Western practitioners’ experience with spiritual practice and the problems they and their teachers encounter. At least for Westerners, Buddhist practice is not immune from the same resistance, defenses, and distortions that have to be worked through, for instance, in psychotherapy. And therapy for some can be a resource in identifying resistance and working through it. The mystic poet Kabir complains, with some humor:

Friend, please tell me what I can do about this world
I hold on to, and keep spinning out!

I gave up sewn clothes, and wore a robe,
But I noticed one day the cloth was well woven.

So I bought some burlap, but I still
Throw it elegantly over my left shoulder.

I pulled back my sexual longings,
And now I discover that I’m angry a lot.

I gave up rage, and now I notice
That I’m greedy all day.

I worked hard at dissolving the greed,
And now I’m proud of myself.

While the mind wants to break its link to the world,
It still holds on to one thing!¹²

It takes effort and courage and willingness to look at our motives again and again before this “holding on” becomes apparent in all its many and subtle guises. Often it requires the guidance of a good teacher or therapist, or a *kalyāna mitra*, a good friend. Or it may take some disappointment in our progress, or feeling stuck for a long time—the Christian mystic Ruysbroeck reportedly remained stuck in the stage of the Dark Night for close to twenty years. Or it may take some exceptionally painful event like the loss of a child or a spouse, a major depression, or a teacher’s betrayal of trust to wake us up and force us to look and see.

But this is the work and always the work: removing the obstructions and obfuscations. Parting the clouds so the sun can shine through. Clearing the dust and dirt from the mirror so we can get an accurate reflection of ourselves. We can’t remove what we don’t see. Such habits of mind are difficult to see, not only because they are like the air we breathe, but because we rely on them for self-protection—literally—to protect whatever self we are invested in at the moment. Among the many things it can do, practice can be a powerful and effective vehicle for bringing our mixed motives to awareness, and giving us the means and opportunity to confront them in this ongoing “path of purification.” It will do this only if we truly want to know and see. Aronson writes, “The critical psychospiritual question is how to stop translating new content into old patterns and actually start experiencing things in a fresh way. . . . The first step in this process is to become experientially aware of what until now have been unconscious processes of assimilation.”¹³

The Indian saint Ramakrishna was once asked why there was evil in the world. He answered, “To thicken the plot!” These very plot thickeners, often the most difficult and most insistent ones, can either lead to more suffering or to the end of suffering—to opening all of us to what is true and real if

we face them honestly, opening to what they have to teach us. Then, as Jack Kornfield says, "We will discover that they never were our true identity."¹⁴ Precisely through the fear and hurt and anger we have contracted around and tried to deny and avoid, we can find freedom, ease, unshakable peace, and a deep, deep joy.

2

*Individuation and Awakening: Romantic Narrative
and the Psychological Interpretation of Buddhism*

RICHARD K. PAYNE

A Personal Reflection

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, while still a struggling doctoral candidate anxious for things that I could add to my curriculum vitae, I was asked to participate in a day-long session for the general public conducted in Berkeley by a group whose name I seem to have purposely forgotten. I was requested to act as a representative not of Japanese Buddhism, a topic with which I had some personal experience, but rather of Shinto, with which I had only a rather general familiarity. Despite my demurral, the person inviting me persisted, and I finally agreed.

As the day unfolded I found the unspoken theme was the unity of all religions. It is popular in some circles—not only among New Age adherents but also more generally among many of the religiously liberal—to claim that all religions ultimately teach the same thing, that all of the great mystics have accessed the same higher truth, and that these higher, mystical teachings form the true essence of each and all religions—an esoteric teaching or "perennial philosophy," accessible only to the initiate.¹ One of the most common metaphors for this view is that although there are many paths up the mountain, they all lead to the one peak.

I resisted fitting Shinto into this view. Although one can find some traditional shrines and some new Shinto-derived religions that do have spiritual traditions and practices—often characterized by traditional concepts of purity and pollution—these seem to be the exceptions. The vast majority of the shrines popular both with native Japanese and with tourists offer no program of individual perfection, no esoteric truths to be acquired by meditative practice, no mystical texts revealing the experiences of ancient masters. From my own admittedly casual observations it seemed that the