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RECENT WORK

BOOK REVIEW ON *MINDFULNESS-BASED EMOTION FOCUSED COUNSELLING* (BY PADMASIRI DE SILVA)*

KATHLEEN HIGGINS

In keeping with its title, Padmasiri de Silva's new book provides an account of the theoretical basis and techniques of mindfulness-based emotion focused counselling, of which he is a practitioner. He argues that our understanding of emotion might be enhanced through greater attention to insights from Buddhist psychology. Addressing an audience of primarily Western trained theorists and practitioners, he centers the Buddhist perspective and considers the practical problems of patients who seek counselling. He offers not only a compendium of suggestions for professional counselors, but also a wealth of reflections and observations of use to anyone who sometimes finds emotions disruptive – to all of us, in other words.

Beginning with a consideration of some recent developments in Western moral psychology and emotion theory, de Silva praises the contributions of many who are sometimes seen as adversaries in theoretical discussion. His analysis does not squarely take sides on common debates in philosophy of emotion, such as that between 'cognitivists' and 'physicalists,' who differ in their views on what emotions essentially are. He applauds the work of William James, but also the work of cognitivist theorists who criticize James and contemporary neurologists who, in turn, criticize the cognitivists.

De Silva is especially interested in the feedback loop that includes both physical and cognitive effects within emotional experience. He emphasizes the value of attending to bodily sensations as a way of becoming more mindful of the dynamics of emotions as they arise and dissipate. Mindfulness is an embodied practice and attending to certain bodily feelings can facilitate greater awareness of one's current state and the possibilities it offers for managing emotions that are encumbering. Especially

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interesting in this connection is de Silva's brief consideration of Bruno Cayoun's account of the bodily impressions of temperature, fluidity, motion, and mass in in connection with specific emotions.

Among specific emotions that de Silva considers, anger is particularly prominent. Because anger shows a clear pattern of amygdala activation, it has been given considerable theoretical attention, and most of those who subscribe to the idea that there is some set of basic emotions consider anger to be among them. De Silva's interest in anger, however, is mainly therapeutic. He points out that anger can be subliminal, emerging in the form of negative thoughts or impulses to action, and it can be the fuel for other emotions that sow trouble in our lives, such as envy. Observing that anger is a source of affliction for many people, he offers a useful summary of means for managing it that have been suggested in Buddhist psychology, such as identifying the anger, accepting it without judgment as a way of opening space to observe it, cultivating emotional antidotes to it, and using the experience as a basis for discovery. Such techniques can be applied to other afflictive emotions as well.

De Silva does not categorize anger or any other emotion as inherently negative, however. A mindfulness-based approach is of necessity sensitive to context, and context will determine whether an instance of a given emotion has beneficial or harmful effects. De Silva points out that anger can be pro-social and politically valuable, in line with the insights of thinkers such as Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan. Even when anger has harmful effects, he does not condemn it, but instead seeks ways to convert it into a source of illumination. His approach to anger thus models the non-judgmental attitude that is essential to mindfulness-based approaches to emotion in general.

One of the especially valuable theoretical contributions of de Silva's work has been to challenge oversimplified generalizations about the Buddhist ideal of equanimity and ideas about how to attain it. He emphasizes that in Buddhist thought, freeing oneself from afflictive psychological states is not a matter of repressing emotions, but of learning not to identify with them. The mindfulness approach helps one to recognize that emotions arise, linger for a while, and eventually pass. Far from insisting on the elimination of emotions, Buddhist psychology encourages cultivating emotions, such as generosity, that are conducive to wellbeing and resilience. It also seeks to transform distressing emotions into opportunities for spiritual growth.

Although he draws appreciatively from multiple scholarly perspectives on emotion, de Silva targets the claims of various Western scholars who contend that Buddhism encourages the extirpation of emotion. He notes that, "Buddhism does not tell people to eliminate anger but to transform it into a liberating insight" (25). Similarly, although he praises Schopenhauer's compassion-centered perspective on morality, he points out that Schopenhauer misunderstood the Buddhist perspective when he suggested that it identifies the will with craving. De Silva observes that Buddhist psychology takes the will to be a "dispositional potential of qualities cultivated over a period of time," with effects on a person's intentionality (64). In the Buddhist view, the will should not be undermined. It can be a source of creativity and purpose, and it can make positive contributions to humanity.

De Silva's comparative consideration of Buddhist and Western approaches to emotions reveals both subtle and more obvious differences between them. For example, the no-self doctrine gives Buddhism a perspective on self-involvement in emotion that differs from that of most Western commentators. From the standpoint of Buddhist psychology, certain problematic emotions involve a false conception of the self, and recognizing this fact can help one to deal with them. The Western-trained reader will also notice de Silva's invocation of many concepts that are basic in Buddhist psychological analysis, such as the five hindrances ("sensual desires, aversion, boredom, restlessness and worry, skeptical doubt"), that can help one to distinguish different kinds of emotion-related problems (247).

Those who consider Buddhist compassion as primarily a matter of altruism may be surprised at how much de Silva emphasizes self-compassion. Yet he argues that the latter is key to getting past mechanisms in which self-criticism plays a role in destructive patterns. An example is the situation in which dwelling on one's faults becomes a form of obsessive self-absorption. De Silva also stresses the positive role self-compassion can play in becoming aware of one's own emotions and thereby becoming better attuned to those of others.

Although he is interested in theoretical accounts of emotion, de Silva is mainly concerned with practical problems. Some features of counselling that he thinks important to stress are the personal relationship between counselor and client (as opposed to impersonal therapy), common-sense strategies (which may be overlooked in accounts devoted to high theory), and tailoring one's approach to the needs the individual client, in accordance with Buddhism's encouragement of using 'skillful means' that are suited to the specific person and the situation.

De Silva works with a paradigm of counselling that involves slowing down, become receptive, and respecting "the flow of life" (72). He understands the counsellor's role as optimally aimed at helping the client develop the practice of mindfulness as a way of life. This way of life can replace patterns that lead to suffering, such as workaholism, status anxiety, boredom, "pedestrian depression," alienation, attentional issues, loneliness, acquisitiveness, and substance addictions. Drawing attention to the value of habitual mindfulness strikes de Silva as especially valuable in the current therapeutic climate, in which psychiatry is focused primarily on disease and alleviating symptoms.

Although the book is addressed mainly to counsellors, de Silva sees the practice of emotion-focused mindfulness as relevant to a much broader swathe of readers. In effect, he is offering counsel to his contemporaries in general, pointing out the emotional underpinnings that make contemporary social problems deeply entrenched. He extends his discussion to considerations of wellbeing and resilience in connection with our relationship to the environment, for example. He urges us to notice the emotional habits that have led to the environmental crisis and continue to fuel it. For example, greed has resulted in model blindness, with market values being applied in inappropriate contexts, and this has led to imbalanced views of what is important in life.

De Silva also suggests that Buddhist perspectives on education could beneficially supplement the rational and empirically oriented approach that is typical in many

school systems. Noting William James's suggestion that judgment is cultivated by bringing attention back from wandering, de Silva sees the capacity to do this as being one of the fruits of contemplative techniques, such as mindfulness-based meditation. Another benefit of practices that quiet the mind (including poetry as well as meditation) is their role in helping "one to develop confidence and trust within oneself" (201).

Education of emotion is critical to moral education, de Silva argues, and he sees the mindfulness approach to emotional education as having the potential to transform culture, helping to replace dissension and violence with compassion and understanding. He thinks that too much attention has been given to moral decision-making, with the result that the role of emotion in moral life has been obscured. For this reason, he joins Schopenhauer and many contemporary virtue ethicists in criticizing the Kantian approach to ethics on the ground that it pays insufficient attention to character, relationships, and emotion. Yet he thinks that many moral theories, including utilitarianism and existentialism, also emphasize choice and volition excessively.

By contrast, humor (particularly humor based on incongruity) can play a role in the education of emotions, according to de Silva, for it can help us to notice the fissures in our ordinary, superficial views of our experiences. He notes the humor evident in such Buddhist parables as that of the "Poisoned Arrow", in which a man who is shot with a poison arrow wants answers to various abstract questions about the shooting before he allows doctors to treat him, with obvious results. De Silva mentions scholarly debate about whether the Buddha engaged in smiling and laughing, and one might see this as amusingly aimed at drawing attention to a similar kind of pedantry, potentially reminding scholarly readers of their own capacity for pedantic folly.

Offering something that will be of interest to just about anyone who picks it up, the book provides a kind of master class with the author. De Silva has certain key points to get across, but he advances them in ways that accommodate various learning styles and interests. One almost has the impression of engaging in conversation with him. Particularly noteworthy is his common-sense appeal to the value of simple, ordinary practices (such as enjoying the pleasure of coffee and cheesecake) as means to undercut the grip of destructive habits and vicious cycles. Here and there he injects a striking anecdote, mentions the kinds of cases he has encountered in therapy, cites a poem from Rumi or Rilke or one of his own, or tells a story about the Buddha. De Silva inspires confidence that his account is steeped in experience, for he refers to events in his personal life, describing his depression after the death of his wife and his journey toward recovery, experiences that motivated him to take up his counselling career in the first place.

De Silva concludes his book with a summary of major themes. While reviewing key points is a standard way to end a presentation, whether oral or written, de Silva departs from convention by presenting his summary of the book's trajectory by way of poetry. He reminds us of central ideas that he has presented, but the poetic approach makes the encounter between author and reader seem more immediate than in the earlier prose. This gives the book's finale an emotional tone that resembles that of the ideal interaction in counselling. Instead of directing us to think back, the conclusion

reminds us of what de Silva has urged us to attend to throughout the book – the present and where we are right now, emotionally and spiritually.