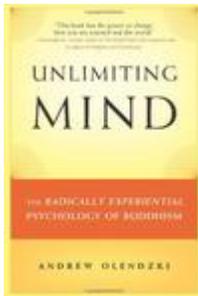


Buddhist Psychology: The Mind That Mindfulness Discloses

A review of



Unlimiting Mind: The Radically Experiential Psychology of Buddhism

by Andrew Olendzki

Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010. 190 pp. ISBN 978-0-86171-620-3.

\$15.95, paperback



Reviewed by

[Roger Thomson](#)

Andrew Olendzki is heir to one of the most ancient teaching traditions of mindfulness, a tradition that he admirably continues in his book, *Unlimiting Mind: The Radically Experiential Psychology of Buddhism*. A guiding figure in the development of Buddhism in the United States, Olendzki is known by the research and clinical communities through his scholarly papers about mindfulness and psychotherapy (e.g., Olendzki, 2005; Siegel, Germer, & Olendzki, 2009). In this book, which will be of interest to psychologists involved in mindfulness-based services or research and those concerned with the interface between psychology and religion, Olendzki clarifies a sector of Buddhist literature that can be difficult to read and even more difficult to appreciate from the original sources—Buddhist psychology.

This ancient psychology developed from the investigative tools that were available to Buddha and his successors in roughly the fourth century BCE: meditative reflection and mindfulness. Because of its completely phenomenological origin, it is, in Olendzki's phrasing, "radically experiential." Although the original Buddhist sources are rich in insight, they are also intimidating in their unfamiliarity. The usefulness of these ancient texts to modern readers depends not only on accurate translation from the original Pali (a language related to Sanskrit) but also on thorough digestion and sensitive exposition by someone who is intimately familiar with Buddhist practice. Andrew Olendzki is just that person. He has a way of conveying the most arcane material in an accessible and insightful way. His discussions of the etymology of crucial Pali terms open their meanings in a way that is both natural and poetic.

Finding the Modern in the Ancient

For clinicians and researchers, the most interesting approach to this work is to read it while reflecting on our modern applications of mindfulness. *Unlimiting Mind* is a rich source of ideas about mindfulness and its clinical applications. This work is relevant to modern psychology because it addresses the central question of Buddhists and psychologists alike: How do we get free of the psychological limitations that stand between us and a fulfilling, worthwhile life?

Olendzki makes it clear that Buddhist psychology offers a nuanced exploration of the psychological inclinations that are responsible for human suffering. He writes insightfully about the conditioning that leads all of us to go through our lives on automatic pilot, concerned primarily with how to accumulate the things we like and get rid of the things we dislike. We are hardly aware of the processes that restrict our well being, and Olendzki's contribution is to make those mental functions that generate ignorance, anger, and greed accessible to our Western consciousness.

One of the processes that Olendzki explicates is *papanca*, a term of "immense significance . . . in the psychological, ethical and philosophical spheres in the teachings of Buddhism" (Nanananda, 1971, p. 14). Referring to our tendency to "mentally proliferate" on our experiences and to become completely absorbed in our personal reactions and elaborations, *papanca* is the Buddhist forerunner of the cognitive and emotional reactivity that has been seen to be at the core of depression relapse processes in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy research (Fresco, Segal, Buis, & Kennedy, 2007). Attachment to our *papanca* is intimately related to acceptance and commitment therapy's (ACT) core concept of cognitive fusion (Hayes, 2004).

In modern mindfulness-based therapies, we see the therapeutic processes of defusion, re-perceiving (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009), and decentering (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale,

2002) as activities that extricate the mind from its addictive delight in *papanca*. Articulating the transformational possibilities of Buddhist mindfulness, Olendzki writes, “When one realizes that the arising feeling is one thing, while the attitude generated in response to it is something else entirely, the chain of compulsive causation is broken and a moment of freedom is born” (p. 79). Thus, the point of mindfulness is to create that freedom to choose, on a moment-by-moment basis, a life of dignity and principle.

Olendzki notes that one branch of the scientific community “would like to set aside the ethical component of the Buddhist tradition to focus their studies on the technology of meditation” (p. 174). He warns against this approach, asserting “mindfulness is deeply and inextricably embedded” in our commitment to ethical principles (p. 174). Mindfulness is values based and cannot be properly said to exist except within that context.

It is especially illuminating to consider the connection between values and mindfulness in acceptance and commitment therapy while reading Olendzki’s account “Changing Your Mind” in Section Four. *Unlimiting Mind* will provide a familiarity with Buddhist psychology that will help us see its convergence with the ACT processes that were rediscovered through relational frame theory.

Is Attachment Really a Problem?

Therapists may well have difficulty with some of the propositions of Buddhist thought. The assertion that the self is an illusion will be challenging to many because it is so radically different from our theories and personal narratives. Even ACT therapists, who aver that the self is not equivalent to any experience but only the one who has the experience (“self-as-context”), may be disquieted by Olendzki’s statement that such expedients are actually “just trading a problem for a much bigger problem” (p. 107). Despite the challenge to our comfortable constructs, Olendzki insists that a self cannot be found in the content, context, or any other part of our experience:

The quandary of the human condition is not that we are connected to too small an object and need to connect instead to a larger object. Rather, it is that the very mechanism of connectivity—attachment—is inherently a cause of suffering. (p. 107)

For many readers, this piles difficulty upon difficulty. We are used to thinking of human attachment as a necessity for self-development and well being, and we believe that suffering is lessened in the presence of secure attachment, not in a pathological avoidance of attachment. A thorough reading will help to clarify this apparent conflict. Still, our discomfort with Buddhist teachings about desire as one of the roots of suffering and the

illusory nature of the self is bound to be evoked by this book, and in reading *Unlimiting Mind*, we should be prepared to be challenged.

If we can remain open, we can also reflect on Olendzki's description of Buddhist practice as a way of accomplishing a profound intimacy and on his repeated assertion that Buddhist practice moves us to be responsive to each other and to heal "the wounds of the world" (p. 43). This is clearly not a psychology of unfeeling solipsism, and the reader's authentic engagement with the inner conflicts raised by this book may well become the source of welcome personal and professional growth.

Helping us tolerate the tensions inherent in the meeting of ancient and modern psychologies is Olendzki's voice. It is self-reflective and kind, willing to acknowledge the failings that are common to us all and the aspiration to wisdom and kindness that we all, at some level, share. In our empirical research and our technical manuals about mindfulness-based interventions, we too rarely penetrate to the authentic experience of benevolent engagement, which is at the heart of mindfulness practice.

His chapter "Caring for Each Other," a reflection on the monastic ethical guidelines about tending to the sick, reminds us of the Buddha's message to his monks, and to us as well: We must be willing to go beyond our "self" interests to respond to the needs of our fellows. Quite simply, there is no one else. The purpose of Buddhist psychology is to establish a conceptual framework that would help us understand ourselves well enough to truly care for ourselves. Olendzki explicates these principles with rigor, clarity, and unflinching compassion.

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