

treatments, or child and adolescent mental health are not covered. The book would have been stronger in my view if the editors had included a broader church of opinion. Sociologically oriented academics dominate the discourse and there is very little room for psychiatrists, psychologists or others working at the coalface. Notwithstanding these criticisms, this book is an extremely valuable addition to the mental health literature.

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First published online 27 June 2014

Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine, 31 (2014).

doi:10.1017/ipm.2014.21

The Trauma of Everyday Life. Edited by Mark Epstein (256pp.; ISBN 9781594205132). The Penguin Press: London, 2013.

Recent years have seen increased interest in the relationship between Buddhist thought and Western psychotherapeutic endeavours. A remarkable amount of this interest has focussed on the practice of mindfulness that has now become an ubiquitous feature of self-help manuals and public discourse in Ireland and elsewhere. This has been accompanied by a genuine renewal of academic interest in the place of Buddhism in Ireland, as evidenced by Laurence Cox's remarkable and revelatory book, *Buddhism and Ireland: From the Celts to the Counter-Culture and Beyond* (Equinox, 2013).

From a therapeutic perspective, this renewal of interest in mindfulness has also been accompanied by some extremely perceptive writings about Buddhism, psychotherapy and psychiatry. One of the key authors in this area is Dr Mark Epstein, an American psychiatrist, whose most recent book, *The Trauma of Everyday Life*, was published in 2013 by the Penguin Press (New York).

As its title suggests, *The Trauma of Everyday Life* is concerned primarily with human responses to trauma, and proposes that the inevitable traumas of life can be used in a way that promotes human growth and ever deeper understandings of change. Epstein proposes that viewing trauma in this fashion connects us with the world in a very profound way. He supports this idea by, among other arguments, presenting a psychobiography or re-interpretation of the life of Buddha, emphasising the early death of Buddha's mother as a formative traumatic experience for Buddha.

Epstein argues that Buddha's loss of his mother was influential in shaping the memories and insights that

led ultimately to 'the foundation of his Middle Path, the route he found between sensory indulgence on the one hand and self-loathing on the other' (p. 116). In developing his argument, Epstein draws skilfully on the insights of Donald Winnicott (1896–1971) the English paediatrician and psychoanalyst best known for his contributions to object relations theory. In traditional psychoanalytic fashion, Epstein even goes on to analyse Buddha's dreams, in which, according to Epstein, Buddha let 'the imagery of the mother move from implicit to narrative memory' thus freeing up his own 'implicit relational capacities' (p. 173). This, in essence, is the kernel of Epstein's argument: that the inevitable traumas of life can be exposed and, if we stop trying to 'resist, deny, overcome or even indulge' them (p. 211), our lives can be changed in a profound and positive way.

The Trauma of Everyday Life

Mark Epstein is very well placed to write a book such as this. He received his undergraduate and medical degrees from Harvard University and is currently in private psychiatric practice in New York City. Epstein is already the author of several well-received books on the interface between Buddhism and psychotherapy including *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy From a Buddhist Perspective*, *Going on Being: Buddhism and the Way of Change*, *Open to Desire: The Truth About What the Buddha Taught* and *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart: A Buddhist Perspective On Wholeness*.

Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that *The Trauma of Everyday Life* arrives festooned with praise from various writers, academics and Buddhist luminaries. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*, writes that 'this daring psychobiography of the Buddha divines in tales of his life the sources of his early emotional pain, and finds in the Buddha's methods a balm for the human psyche. In a breath-taking display of the therapeutic art, Epstein does ingenious psychodynamic detective work, deducing what ailed the Buddha, and why his remedies work so well'.

Siddhartha Mukherjee, author of *The Emperor of All Maladies*, describes the book as 'a rare and remarkable achievement' that 'fuses deep scholarship with deep tenderness – in the spirit of the greatest Buddhist teachers'. Robert A.F. Thurman, Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University and author of *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*, goes even further: 'Buddha would have loved it – I love it! I recommend it – a transforming pleasure'!

Psychotherapy without the self

Consistent with these accolades, *The Trauma of Everyday Life* is indeed very well informed, smoothly written and

deeply involving. It is replete with Buddhist anecdotes and stories, insights into psychotherapeutic practice, and an especially compelling passage about Epstein's father, a remarkable-sounding man, a physician who had 'successfully avoided the subject of his own mortality for much of his life' (pp. 179–180).

Notwithstanding these very many strengths, however, I found Epstein's central argument unconvincing at several levels. His psychoanalytic technique, especially in relation to Buddha's dreams, is both elegant and erudite, but certain passages in the book appear forced, as if the psychoanalytic technique is an unnecessary add-on to arguments that would have stood perfectly well on their own without the addition of psychoanalysis. The same applies to some of the passages about Buddha's mother: I remain unconvinced that this interpretation of Buddha's life, however elegant it may be, adds substantially to understandings of Buddhist literature or, indeed, psychoanalysis.

Notwithstanding these concerns, there is much to admire in *The Trauma of Everyday Life* and it remains well ahead of many contributions to the ever-deepening

literature on Buddhism and Western psychotherapeutic practice. For me, however, Epstein's finest book is still *Psychotherapy Without the Self: A Buddhist Perspective*, a beguiling collection of elegant, piercing reflections drawn from Epstein's 25 years of writing on the themes of psychotherapy and Buddhism. In this concise, memorable volume, Epstein explores the similarities and difference, paradoxes and insights, of both Western and Buddhist traditions, and offers a view of both that is thoughtful, practical and unexpectedly liberating for both.

As a result, *Psychotherapy Without the Self* remains the most insightful and convincing book for readers interested in this intriguing field.

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First published online 13 May 2014