Buddhism and the Art of Psychotherapy
by Hayao Kawai, Kyoto
Texas A & M, 1996
College Station, Texas

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Professor Kawai’s Buddhism and the Art of Psychotherapy was first published in 1996. Today, 12 years later, after his passing away in July 2007, the book can be considered an important legacy of a great man. From an external point of view he can be considered to be a great man on account of his visible achievements. Most importantly for this journal, they include the successful introduction of Dora Kalff’s sandplay therapy to Japan, with the help of outstanding colleagues like Jungian psychology Professors Higuchi and Yamanaka. He was also a renowned professor of psychology at Kyoto University, author of numerous books on psychology and culture mostly published in Japanese, and a very much sought-after, innovative psychotherapist. It is rare that a person who dedicates his life to the study of inner processes and healing extends his influence beyond the privacy of the consulting room or academic circles and even becomes chosen to hold a public political position, as it was the case with him, who became a minister of culture.
However, external success is not necessarily the sign of true inner qualities and also does not always follow such qualities. In his case, I believe that the depth of his own individuation process and personality was an important basis for his outer achievements. The present book offers the unique opportunity to get glimpses of his capacity to reflect on himself, and of the attitude that lies at the heart of his therapeutic capacity and his humanism.

An important aspect of his path which he reviews in the book was his initial rejection of all that is Japanese and in particular Japanese mythology and religion, which were used to keep up the delusion of invincibility during war. I remember him saying that he mistrusted Buddhist priests who praised Buddhism as a force for peace in the modern world without acknowledging its failure during war time not to stand up against military aggression.

Thus, at first he embraced Western rationalism. Later, when he decided to engage in the study of Jungian psychology in America, he reacted very skeptically when his analyst asked him to pay attention to his dreams, something he considered unscientific. Later he recalls that it was a great shock to discover through dream analysis that Japanese mythology had great meaning for him. Moreover, over time he arrived at an understanding that those psychotherapies and in particular depth psychology, which deals with the individual’s relation to phenomena, cannot be considered “scientific” in the sense of the rationality of natural science aiming at “universal validity.” It is for this reason that in the title he speaks of the “art of psychotherapy.” As a matter of fact, he understands the contributions and reflections in his book as a contribution to a “new science of the human being” aimed at comprehending living beings as a whole, a science free of fixed positions, closer to religion. The book shows how gradually, and surprisingly at first, he discovered that the way he practiced psychotherapy had a great affinity with Buddhist views, which he found expressed in Buddhist texts such as the Flower Garland Sutra and Awakening of the Faith Sutra.

It is in accord with Buddhist tradition that he elaborately analyses the question “what am I?” According to Buddhism, an “I” which can be defined or identified with a unique quality cannot be found. In answer to his question, among other possibilities, he examines the answer “I am a therapist, in the sense of a healthy person without ailment.” Based on a dream he had, where he saw himself as a double, one being himself as therapist and then again himself as a patient, he understood that he needed to see himself both as a therapist as well as a patient, which changed and improved his therapeutic attitude. Again, getting rid of the idea of a fixed identity, an identity that one could cling to, he considers
that in therapy sessions he feels sometimes sitting as a stone or a patient or Kannon rather than a “therapist.” Similarly he realized that the strong wish to “cure” the patient could be an obstacle as well, discovering that when he focused less on that purpose, in some cases the symptoms went away with less difficulty.

Going even a step further he offers radical reflections on the meaning of symptoms. He suggests that they may have a function like the famous *koans* in Zen Buddhism. In his view, having symptoms may well force the patient to relate to deeper consciousness, instead of relying just on a more superficial consciousness. Thus, he even considers the possibility that if symptoms are cured too fast, one might lose an opportunity to go deeper.

As a therapist, he found it important to master a capacity to move from a superficial, more personal level of consciousness to a deeper level free of discriminating thoughts, a transpersonal or cosmic cognition. I recall that in a seminar in Switzerland he expressed himself slightly in a similar way, distinguishing between “strong transference,” implying strong feelings such as hatred or desire, and “deep transference” related to what the Japanese call *hara*, the center of the person. In his view it is the “deep transference” which is crucial for healing.

I felt that he exemplified this capacity to rest in himself in the way he was present in case discussions. Looking at him, it was unclear whether he was asleep or in a deep inner state. But suddenly, exactly at the right moment, he was there, able to make a precise and deep observation on what was discussed.

The book develops in detail, with examples, dreams and reference to classical texts. the above mentioned topics and more. It contains valuable insights on the differences between the Western and Japanese type of consciousness and value of the “ego.” He suggests a form of therapy grounded in a spiritual attitude without reducing it to one particular confession, or fixed conviction such as “Buddhism” or perhaps “Christianity” or even “Rationalism.” It is certainly an important and stimulating text for Jungians, Buddhists and in particular sandplay therapists.