

Book Review by Dr Tony Dargan



'Breaking Down is waking up: Can Psychological Suffering be a Spiritual Gateway?'

By Russell Razzaque

ISBN 978-1-78028-666-2 Watkins publishing 2014

It is beyond doubt that Mental Health is a complex area of medicine which requires the practitioners of the field to think across many disciplines like anthropology, sociology, philosophy and more.

In this book Dr Russell Razzaque elegantly draws on various 'paths' that humans follow to understand the nature of reality and attempts to explain the nature of mental illness by amalgamating these ideas. He then explores how mental distress can be relieved, by understanding these experiences and using them to gain a higher level of awareness.

In the first part of the book Razzaque writes about concepts or symptoms in mental health. He draws similarities between these symptoms and various 'culturally described experiences' using examples like 'psychomotor retardation' and the deliberate practice of spiritual retreats (meditative practices). In doing so he broadens our perspective on these experiences. He attempts to draw the reader's attention to how a description of an experience is very much context-based and hence the understanding of experience by an observer. The author also writes about his personal experiences.

In the second part Razzaque writes about ego, its development and its consequences. This he uses to explain the relation of 'I' with the external world. He goes on to discuss the nature of reality using concepts from quantum physics and explores various religious views and texts to understand the nature of reality. He writes about how ego helps us relate to the external reality and how overreliance on ego-judgment may hamper our understanding of the true nature of reality, leading to mental distress. He describes how the separation between I and external reality may be illusory.

In part three of the book, the ideas written about above are amalgamated and Razzaque emphasises that science and spirituality (or any other organised field aiming to understand the nature of truth) are ultimately different paths to the

same 'truth'. He describes how the ego and how life experiences combine to shape it, making an individual predisposed to certain types of mental illness. At the same time, he acknowledges that there may be other factors contributing to causation and perpetuation of mental illness, e.g. genetics. He illustrates the 'tension' between the ability to gain self-awareness and stress/trauma/drug use as opposing forces and how by consistently practicing meditation, self-awareness may be gained. He calls this 'the wheel of awakening'.

Part four begins by taking the reader through the journey of psychiatric treatments and their history. Razzaque emphasises the controversial nature of the treatments and their limited success in 'curing' illness. He elucidates current treatments, including pharmacological and psychotherapeutic interventions, and their pitfalls in treating the 'person', quoting various authors and experiments to illustrate this. He introduces the concept of Mindfulness. He explains the origins of Mindfulness in Buddhist practice and touches on therapies based on these principles, like Dialectic Behaviour Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. He finally ends by exploring how Mindfulness can lead to the development of a more compassionate way of life, and how it helps in having more fulfilling relationships and happiness.

The book is well written and very readable. Dr Russell Razzaque has ensured that it appeals to a wide range of audiences by keeping it jargon-free and 'culture-neutral'. It deals with contemporary dilemmas faced by the psychiatrists. It is an enjoyable read for somebody who would like to think 'holistically' about mental illness. It is, however, repetitive around the concept of ego. Some of the ideas like quantum physics and its relation to mental health could better have been described in more detail.

All in all, a four star book!