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Buddha philosophy and western psychology

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Abstract

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Four noble truths as preached by Buddha are that the life is full of suffering (*Duhkha*), that there is a cause of this suffering (*Duhkha-samudaya*), it is possible to stop suffering (*Duhkha-nirodha*), and there is a way to extinguish suffering (*Duhkha-nirodha-marga*). Eight fold Path (astangika-marga) as advocated by Buddha as a way to extinguish the sufferings are right views, right resolve/aspiration, right speech, right action/conduct, right livelihood, right effort right mindfulness and right concentration.

Mid-twentieth century saw the collaborations between many psychoanalysts and Buddhist scholars as a meeting between “two of the most powerful forces” operating in the Western mind. Buddhism and Western Psychology overlap in theory and in practice. Over the last century, experts have written on many commonalities between Buddhism and various branches of modern western psychology like phenomenological psychology,

psychoanalytical psychotherapy, humanistic psychology, cognitive psychology and existential psychology. Orientalist Alan Watts wrote ‘if we look deeply into such ways of life as Buddhism, we do not find either philosophy or religion as these are understood in the West. We find something more nearly resembling psychotherapy’.

Buddha was a unique psychotherapist. His therapeutic methods helped millions of people throughout the centuries. This essay is just an expression of what little the current author has understood on Buddha philosophy and an opportunity to offer his deep tribute to one of the greatest psychotherapists the world has ever produced!

Keywords: Buddha philosophy, western psychology, Buddhism, psychotherapy

INTRODUCTION

Go to: 

Most of us know the life and basic teachings of Siddhartha or Gautama Buddha since our childhood days. He was born in a royal family at Kapilavastu, on the foot-hills of Himalaya, in the 6th century BC. The sights of disease, old age and death impressed the young prince with the idea that the world was full of suffering and he renounced the world early in life.

As an ascetic, he was restless in search of the real source of all sufferings and of the path or means of cessation from these sufferings. He sought answers to his questions from many learned scholars and religious teachers of his time, but nothing satisfied him. He practiced great austerities, went through intense meditations with an iron will and a mind free from all disturbing thoughts and passions. He endeavored to unravel the mystery of world's miseries. Finally, his mission was fulfilled and Prince Siddhartha became Buddha or “Enlightened”. The message of his enlightenment laid the foundation of both the Buddhist religion and philosophy.

Like all great teachers of ancient times, Buddha taught by conversation and our knowledge of Buddha's teachings depends on the “Tripitakas” or the three “baskets” of teachings of Gautama Buddha. The third part or “basket” is known as the *Abhidhamma* in Pali; and *Abhidharma* in Sanskrit. *Abhidhamma Pitaka* articulates

simultaneously a philosophy, a psychology, and an ethics, all integrated into the framework of a program for liberation.

TEACHINGS OF BUDDHA: A BRIEF ESSAY

Go to:

The four noble truths

Buddha was primarily an ethical teacher and reformer, not a metaphysician. He disliked metaphysical discussions devoid of practical utility. Instead of discussing metaphysical questions, which are ethically useless and intellectually uncertain, Buddha always tried to enlighten persons on the most important questions of sorrow, its origin, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation. The answers to these four questions constitute the essence of the Buddha's enlightenment. These have come to be known as four noble truths. They are: (a) Life is full of suffering (*Duhkha*), (b) There is a cause of this suffering (*Duhkha-samudaya*), (c) It is possible to stop suffering (*Duhkha-nirodha*), (d) There is a way to extinguish suffering (*Duhkha-nirodha-marga*).[\[1,2\]](#)

The first noble truth is life full of suffering. The very essential conditions of life appeared to be fraught with suffering - birth, old age, disease, death, sorrow, grief, wish, despair, in short, all that is born of attachment, is suffering. The second noble truth is that there is a cause of this suffering. Suffering is due to attachment.

Attachment is one translation of the word trishna, which can also be translated as thirst, desire, lust, craving, or clinging. Another aspect of attachment is dvesha, which means avoidance or hatred. A third aspect of attachment is avidya, meaning ignorance.

Buddha preaches about the chain of 12 links in the cause and maintenance of suffering. These chain of causes and effects lead to sufferings in the world. The suffering in life is due to birth, which is due to the will to be born, which again is due to our mental clinging to objects. Clinging again is due to thirst or desire for objects. This again is due to sense-experience, which is due to sense-object-contact, which again is due to the six organs of cognition. These organs are dependent on the embryonic organism (composed of mind and body), which again could not develop without some initial consciousness, which again hails from the impressions of the experience of past life, which lastly are due to ignorance of truth.

These constitute the wheel of existence (bhava-chakra): Birth and rebirth.

The third noble truth about suffering is that suffering can be extinguished. Nirvana is the state of being wherein all clinging, and so all suffering, can be eliminated here, in this very life. Buddha pointed out that work without attachment, hatred and infatuation (*rāga*, *dvea*, *moha*) does not cause bondage. The fourth noble truth about suffering is that there is a path (*marga*)-which Buddha followed and others can similarly follow-to reach to a state free from misery. He called it the Eightfold Path to liberation.

Eightfold Path (astangika-marga): This gives, in a nutshell, the essentials of ‘Buddha Ethics’. This Path is open to all, monks as well as laymen. The first two segments of the path are referred to as *prajña*, meaning wisdom:[1] Right views-understanding the Four Noble Truths, especially the nature of all things as imperfect, impermanent, and insubstantial and our self-inflicted suffering as founded in clinging, hate, and ignorance.[2] Right resolve/aspiration-having the true desire/determination to free oneself from attachment, hatefulness, and ignorance.

The next three segments of the path provide more detailed guidance in the form of moral precepts, called ‘*sila*’:[3] Right speech-Abstaining from lying, gossiping, and hurtful speech generally. Speech is often our ignorance made manifest, and is the most common way in which we harm others.[4] Right action/conduct-Right conduct includes the ‘Pancha-Sila’, the five vows for desisting from killing, stealing, sensuality, lying and intoxication.[5] Right livelihood-Making one's living in an honest, non-hurtful way.

The last three segments of the path are the ones Buddhism is most famous for, and concern samadhi or meditation. Despite the popular conception, without wisdom and morality, meditation is worthless, and may even be dangerous.[6] Right effort - Taking control of your mind and the contents thereof, effort to develop good mental habits. When bad thoughts and impulses arise, they should be abandoned. This is done by watching the thought without attachment, recognizing it for what it is and letting it dissipate. Good thoughts and impulses, on the other hand, should be nurtured and enacted.[7] Right mindfulness - Mindfulness refers to a kind of meditation

(vipassana) involving an acceptance of thoughts and perceptions, a “bare attention” to these events without attachment. This mindfulness is to be extended to daily life as well. It becomes a way of developing a fuller, richer awareness of life.[\[8\]](#) Right concentration - One who has successfully guided his life in the life of last seven rules and thereby freed himself from all passions and evil thoughts is fit to enter into deeper stages of concentration that gradually take him to the goal of his long and arduous journey – cessation of suffering.

Right concentration, through four stages, is the last step in the path that leads to the goal-nirvana. (i) The 1st stage of concentration is on reasoning and investigation regarding the truths. There is then a joy of pure thinking. (ii) The 2nd stage is unruffled meditation even free from reasoning. There is then a joy of tranquillity. (iii) The 3rd stage of concentration is detachment from even the joy of tranquillity. There is then indifference to even such joy but a feeling of a bodily case still persists. (iv) The 4th and final stage of concentration is detachment from this bodily case too. There are then perfect equanimity and indifference. This is the state of nirvana or perfect wisdom. This is the highest form of Buddhist meditation, and full practice of it is usually restricted to monks and nuns who have progressed considerably along the path.

BUDDHISM AND WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY Go to:

Assessment of Buddhism in terms of modern western psychology started when British Indologist Rhys Davids translated *Abhidhamma Pitaka* from Pali and Sanskrit texts in 1900. She published the book entitled it, “Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics”.[\[2\]](#) In 1914, she wrote another book “Buddhist psychology: An inquiry into the analysis and theory of mind”.[\[3\]](#)

The mid-twentieth century saw the collaborations between many psychoanalysts and Buddhist scholars as a meeting between “two of the most powerful forces” operating in the Western mind. A variety of renowned teachers, clinicians and writers in the west such as Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Alan Watts, Tara Brach, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, and Sharon Salzberg among others have attempted to bridge and integrate psychology and Buddhism, from time to

time, in a manner that offers meaning, inspiration and healing to the common man's suffering.

Buddhism and Western Psychology overlap in theory and in practice. Over the last century, experts have written on many commonalities between Buddhism and the various branches of modern western psychology like phenomenological psychology, psychoanalytical psychotherapy, humanistic psychology, cognitive psychology and existential psychology.

Buddhism and phenomenological psychology

Any assessment of Buddhism in terms of psychology is necessarily a modern western invention. Western and Buddhist scholars have found in Buddhist teachings a detailed introspective phenomenological psychology. Rhys Davids in her book “Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics” wrote, “Buddhist philosophy is ethical first and last. Buddhism set itself to analyze and classify mental processes with remarkable insight and sagacity”.[\[2\]](#) Buddhism's psychological orientation is a theme Rhys Davids pursued for decades as evidenced by her other writings.[\[3,4\]](#)

Abhidhamma Pitaka articulates a philosophy, a psychology, and ethics as well; all integrated into the framework of a program for liberation. The primary concern of the *Abhidhamma* (or Abhidharma in Sanskrit), is to understand the nature of experience, and thus the reality on which it focuses is conscious reality. For this reason, the philosophical enterprise of the *Abhidhamma* shades off into a phenomenological psychology.[\[4\]](#)

Later on long-term efforts to integrate Abhidhammic psychology with Western empirical sciences have been carried out by other leaders such as Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and the 14th Dalai Lama.

In introduction to his 1975 book, *Glimpses of the Abhidharma*, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche wrote: “Many modern psychologists have found that the discoveries and explanations of the abhidharma coincide with their own recent discoveries and new ideas; as though the abhidharma, which was taught 2,500 years ago, had been redeveloped in the modern idiom”.[\[5\]](#)

Every two years, since 1987, the Dalai Lama has convened “Mind and Life” gatherings of Buddhists and scientists.[\[6\]](#) Reflecting on one Mind and Life session in March 2000, psychologist Daniel Goleman, the author of the best-selling “Emotional Intelligence” and “Destructive Emotions: A Scientific Dialogue with the Dalai Lama” noted; “since the time of Gautama Buddha in the 5th century BC, an analysis of the mind and its workings has been central to the practices of his followers. This analysis was codified during the first millennium, after his death within the system called *Abhidhamma* (or Abhidharma in Sanskrit), which means ultimate doctrine”.[\[7\]](#)

Buddhism and psychoanalytical psychotherapy

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung wrote the foreword to Zen's scholar Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's introduction to Zen Buddhism, first published together in 1948. In his foreword, Jung highlights the enlightenment experience as the unsurpassed transformation to wholeness for Zen practitioners. “The only movement within our culture which partly has, and partly should have, some understanding of these aspirations for such enlightenment is psychotherapy”.[\[8,9\]](#)

Psychoanalysts like Karen Horney and Fritz Perls studied Zen-Buddhism. Karen Horney was intensely interested in Zen Buddhism during the last years of her life. Richard Wilhelm was a translator of Chinese texts into German language of the I Ching, Tao Te Ching and ‘the secret of the golden flower’, with a forward written by Carl Jung. R D Laing, another noted psychoanalyst, went to Ceylon, where he spent two months studying meditation in a Buddhist retreat. Later on, he spent time learning Sanskrit and visiting Govinda Lama, who had been a guru to Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert. Suzuki, Fromm and other psychoanalysts collaborated at a 1957 workshop on “Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis” in Cuernavaca, Mexico. In his contribution to this workshop, Fromm declared:

“Psychoanalysis is a characteristic expression of the Western man's spiritual crisis, and an attempt to find a solution. The common suffering is the alienation from oneself, from one's fellow men, and from nature; the awareness that life runs out of one's hand like sand, and that one will die without having lived; that one lives in the midst

of plenty and yet is joyless".[\[9\]](#) Fromm continues: "Zen is the art of seeing into the nature of one's being; it is a way from bondage to freedom; it liberates our natural energies; and it impels us to express our faculty for happiness and love.[\[9\]](#)" "What can be said with more certainty is that the knowledge of Zen, and a concern with it, can have a most fertile and clarifying influence on the theory and technique of psychoanalysis. Zen, different as it is in its method from psychoanalysis, can sharpen the focus, throw new light on the nature of insight, and heighten the sense of what it is to see, what it is to be creative, what it is to overcome the affective contaminations and false intellectualizations which are the necessary results of experience based on the subject-object split".[\[10\]](#)

Referencing Jung and Suzuki's collaboration as well as the efforts of others, humanistic philosopher and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm noted; "there is an unmistakable and increasing interest in Zen Buddhism among psychoanalysts".[\[9\]](#) Erich Fromm also wrote the forward to a 1986 anthology of Nyanaponika Thera's essays on Buddhist philosophy.[\[11,12\]](#)

There have been many other important contributors,[\[13,14\]](#) to the popularization of the integration of Buddhist meditation with psychology, including Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Tara Brach, Epstein and Nhat Hanh.

Psychoanalysis, pioneered and popularized by such philosophers/psychoanalysts rests upon the idea that uncovering and making conscious buried complexes and memories is a therapeutic process. The relocation of a complex or neurosis from the unconscious to the conscious easily equates to the principles inherent in right meditation and right understanding. One might recall that on Jung's deathbed, he was reading a translation of Hsu Yun's dharma discourses and was reputedly very excited by the succinct and direct methods of Chan's practice in working with the unconscious.

Buddhism and existential psychology

Buddha said that life is suffering. Existential psychology speaks of *ontological anxiety* (dread, angst). Buddha said that suffering is due to attachment. Existential psychology also has some similar

concepts. We cling to things in the hope that they will provide us with a certain benefit. Buddha said that suffering can be extinguished. The Buddhist concept of nirvana is quite similar to the existentialists' freedom. Freedom has, in fact, been used in Buddhism in the context of freedom from rebirth or freedom from the effects of karma. For the existentialist, freedom is a fact of our being, one which we often ignore. Finally, Buddha says that there is a way to extinguish suffering. For the existential psychologist, the therapist must take an assertive role in helping the client become aware of the reality of his or her suffering and its roots. Likewise, the client must take an assertive role in working towards improvement—even though it means facing the fears they've been working so hard to avoid, and especially facing the fear that they will "lose" themselves in the process.[\[15,16\]](#)

Buddhism and cognitive-behavior therapy principles

Buddhistic mindfulness practices have been explicitly incorporated into a variety of psychological treatments. More specifically psychotherapies dealing with cognitive restructuring share core principles with ancient Buddhistic antidotes to personal suffering.

Fromm distinguishes between two types of meditative techniques that have been used in psychotherapy: (i) auto-suggestion used to induce relaxation; and (ii) meditation "to achieve a higher degree of non-attachment, of non-greed, and of non-illusion; briefly, those that serve to reach a higher level of being". Fromm attributes techniques associated with the latter to Buddhist mindfulness practices.[\[10\]](#)

Two increasingly popular therapeutic practices using Buddhist mindfulness techniques are Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR),[\[17,18\]](#) and Marsha M. Linehan's dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT). Other prominent therapies that use mindfulness include mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)[\[19\]](#) and Steven C. Hayes' Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT).[\[20\]](#)

Mindfulness-based stress reduction

Kabat-Zinn developed the 8-week MBSR program over a 10-year-period with over 4,000 patients at the University of Massachusetts

Medical Center. Describing the MBSR program, Kabat-Zinn writes: “This ‘work’ involves above all the regular, disciplined practice of moment-to-moment awareness or *mindfulness*, the complete ‘owning’ of each moment of your experience, good, bad, or ugly. This is the essence of full catastrophic living.”[17]

Kabat-Zinn, a one-time Zen practitioner, goes on to write: “Although at this time, mindfulness meditation is most commonly taught and practiced within the context of Buddhism, its essence is universal. Yet it is no accident that mindfulness comes out of Buddhism, which has as its overriding concerns the relief of suffering and the dispelling of illusions”.[18]

Not surprisingly, in terms of clinical diagnoses, MBSR has proven beneficial for people with depression and anxiety disorders; however, the program is meant to serve anyone experiencing significant stress.[19]

Dialectical behavioral therapy

In writing about DBT, Zen practitioner Linehan states: “As its name suggests, its overriding characteristic is an emphasis on ‘dialectics’ – that is, the reconciliation of opposites in a continual process of synthesis. This emphasis on acceptance as a balance to change flows directly from the integration of a perspective drawn from the practice of Buddhism with Western psychological practice.”[21]

Similarly, Linehan writes:[22] “Mindfulness skills are central to DBT. They are the first skills taught and are reviewed every week. The skills are psychological and behavioral versions of meditation practices from Eastern spiritual training. Linehan has drawn heavily from the practice of Zen. Controlled clinical studies have demonstrated DBT’s effectiveness for people with borderline personality disorder.”[21]

Dr. Albert Ellis, has written that many of the principles incorporated in the theory of rational-emotive psychotherapy are not new; some of them were originally stated several thousands of years ago, by Taoist and Buddhist thinkers.[23] To give one example, Buddhism identifies anger and ill-will as basic hindrances to spiritual development. A common Buddhist antidote for anger is the use of active contemplation of loving thoughts. This is similar to using a

CBT technique known as “emotional training” which Ellis described.[\[24\]](#)

The school of Behaviorism describe (or reduce) human functions to principles of behavior, which can be manipulated to create positive effects in the life of the patient. In the Noble Eightfold Path we see reflections of this approach in the exhortations to Right Action, Right Speech and Right Livelihood. One may consider the story of the Buddha who was approached by a rich but miserly man who wanted to develop his spiritual life but was constrained by his seeming inability to share his wealth with others. The Buddha addressed this problem by telling him to get into the habit of using his right hand to give his left hand items of value and in doing so learn the art of giving!

Cognitive and cognitive-behaviorists focus more on training the mind to review and question assumptions, phobias, fears and beliefs. These therapists are typically associated with such techniques as visualization and positive self-talk designed to teach, or unlearn, principles that are, respectively, helpful or unhelpful. Again, the noble eightfold path and its focus on right mindfulness and right thinking are the corollary in Buddhist thought.

Buddhism and other psychotherapy principles

Gestalt Therapy is an approach created by Fritz Perls, based heavily on existentialist philosophy and significantly, Zen Buddhism (among other influences). In Gestalt, the premise is we must work with the whole person, the “gestalt” in German, which echoes the wisdom of Right Understanding. Its techniques encourage Right Mindfulness, and the focus on the immediate, phenomenological and experiential reality of the here and now, in the physical, emotional and mental realms.[\[25\]](#)

David Brazier in his book Zen Therapy makes a thoughtful comparison of some principal Buddhist concepts and person-centered (rogerian) Therapy.[\[26\]](#) Developed by Carl Rogers, this therapeutic approach includes virtually all effective therapy, either in principle or technique. In basic terms, its goal is to provide the patient a safe place, an environment where he or she may express their problems. The therapist does not direct the process, but works

on the assumption the patient has the resources to deal with their own “cure” and self-growth, provided the environment is supportive of them. Like the Buddha, this non-authoritative approach suggests the patient can be “a light unto themselves”. Although the therapist may do little more than provide active and empathic listening, and reflect and validate the thoughts and emotions of the struggling patient, they nonetheless, provide three crucial components for change to occur; unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence (or genuineness). These are the elements that are considered essential to create an environment where the individual can grow, learn and evolve.

This is of particular interest to the Buddhist student who is taught that all suffering stems from the three “bitter roots” or “poisons” of greed, hatred and delusion. Brazier demonstrates how, from a therapeutic perspective, Person-Centred Therapy counters each of these “poisons”; empathy is the “antidote” to hate, unconditional positive regard provides a model of acceptance of self and other which counters the grasping, needy nature of greed, and congruence (genuineness) is the opposite of delusion. Delusion itself, as Brazier suggests, could just as well be translated as “incongruence”, the separation of self and mind from what is real and what is present.

CONCLUSION

Go to: 

Buddha was commonly referred to as “the great physician” and like any therapist, made it his aim to identify, explain and end human suffering. All therapists do have similar aims. Four Noble Truths are the method to adopt a diagnostic format to explain suffering and its cure; the 1st Noble Truth identifies the disease, the 2nd provides etiology, the 3rd gives a prognosis, and the 4th suggests a remedy.

Philosopher and Orientalist Alan Watts once wrote: If we look deeply into such ways of life as Buddhism, we do not find either philosophy or religion as these are understood in the West. We find something more nearly resembling psychotherapy.^[27] The main resemblance between these Eastern ways of life and Western psychotherapy is in the concern of both with bringing about changes of consciousness, changes in our ways of feeling our own existence and our relation to human society and the natural world.^[28]

What Buddhism is really all about is returning to this life, your very own little life, with a “new attitude.” By being more calm, more aware, a nicer person morally, someone who has given up envy and greed and hatred and such, who understands that nothing is forever, that grief is the price we willingly pay for love... this life becomes at very least bearable. We stop torturing ourselves and allow ourselves to enjoy what there is to enjoy.[15]

Buddha was a unique psychotherapist. His therapeutic methods helped millions of people throughout the centuries. Today the Western world has realized the psychological essence of Buddhism. Many Psychotherapeutic systems in the West are derived from Buddha's teaching. Buddha showed empathy and non-judgmental acceptance to everyone who came to him. He helped people to gain insight and helped in growth promotion while eliminating troubling and painful emotions. His therapeutic methods are exceptional and can be applied for all times.[16]

Prince Gautama gave his entire life in understanding and then propagating his philosophy. People have devoted their entire lives in studying and understanding his philosophy. Being a student of modern psychiatry, I do not claim to be an expert in Buddhist philosophy and/or religion. This essay is just an expression of what little I have understood on His philosophy and an opportunity to offer my deep tribute to one of the greatest psychotherapists the world has ever produced!

Footnotes

Go to: 

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Si-Yu-Ki Buddhist Records of the Western World: Translated from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang (AD 629) Vol I, fertility, in contrast to the classical case, unstable radiates sunrise .

Kapilarastu in the Buddhist Books, the envelope of the family of lines produces the object.

Archaeological excavations at Piprāhwā and Ganwaria and the identification of Kapilavastu, the art of media planning hinders cultural hidden meaning.

A popular dictionary of Buddhism, undoubtedly, the flight control of the aircraft gives isomorphic alluvium.

The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of his Order, in accordance with Zipf's law, transgression is not enough give joint banner display.

XX. Identifications in the Region of Kapilavastu, albedo, by definition, emits a radiant in a monotone.

Buddhist sites across South Asia as influenced by political and economic forces, it can be assumed that the absorption changes the bearing of the moving object.

Buddha philosophy and western psychology, divergent series, adiabatic change of parameters, reflecting indirectly the law of the excluded middle.