

APPLES AND BRICKS? SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Considerable attention is currently being directed to comparisons between Buddhism and psychotherapy. Of the many aspects of this topic, I wish to focus on three areas: the possibility of significant differences in the intentions of Buddhism and psychotherapy; an examination of the differences between “membership” cultures and individual cultures which have implications in spiritual training and development; and possible differences in the results of psychological and spiritual development.

The initial question is whether Buddhism and psychotherapy are really comparable. Are they two different fruits, an apple and an orange, for instance, or are they two quite different objects, say, an apple and a brick? We would not, generally speaking, think of calling Christianity or Judaism a form of psychotherapy. Why is there interest in comparing Buddhism with psychotherapy? Part of the answer lies in the wealth of material about mind which is present in Buddhism. Where Christianity and Judaism focus attention on the soul (which partakes of the nature of God), Buddhism talks directly about the mind. Nontheistic in nature, Buddhism views the end of spiritual development as complete knowledge rather than as

union with a supreme being. This approach allows parallels between psychological and scientific perspectives more easily than theistic traditions.

However, it is unwise to consider Buddhism as simply a form of psychotherapy. There are very definite differences in the way the intentions of these two disciplines are defined.

DIFFERENT INTENTIONS

The intention of Buddhist practice is easily described in traditional terms. It is to find release from suffering. This release comes through the experiential understanding of the Four Noble Truths: the Truth of Suffering; the Truth of the Origin of Suffering; the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering; and the Truth of the Path. Suffering, in this context, refers to the whole range of pain and distress, from subtle frustration and undefined feelings of dissatisfaction through emotional pain and discomfort to the physical pain and suffering of disease and injury. The first truth simply says that there is suffering. In other words, suffering is an integral part of life, a view echoed by Freud when he described his own work as changing neurotic suffering into ordinary human suffering. The second truth says that suffering develops from the dullness and confusion present in and caused by certain states of mind, specifically those of attachment, aversion, and indifference. The third truth says that there is an end to suffering; that is, there is a state in which the process through which suffering arises comes to an end. The fourth truth describes the way of living and being which will lead to the cessation of suffering.¹ The exact nature of this release from suffering, which is called nirvana, is explained differently in different schools, but one common element among them is that confused states of mind arise from a false or mistaken sense of self. This sense of self creates a feeling of separation from the world. To become free of suffering, it is necessary (and sufficient) to come to an accu-

rate experiential understanding of who or what we are. Specifically, Buddhism does not regard the self as an entity existing in its own right. Emotional and habitual attachment to the sense of self is regarded as the basic problem. In summary, the intention of Buddhism is to find complete release from suffering through a resolution of our felt sense of separation from the world.

Psychotherapy, on the other hand, aims to resolve suffering by facilitating the development of a person into a socially functional individual, by helping that person through areas of personal development which have been blocked or distorted. For example, a person with borderline character disorder might be led to become a socially functional person through the process of re-parenting, or a woman might be encouraged to re-live the childhood trauma of sexual abuse in order to be able to form meaningful and stable relationships. In other words, in psychotherapy attention is directed at the particular forms of suffering that a person is experiencing in an attempt to alleviate that suffering through revealing its specific underlying patterns. This contrasts with the more universal approach to suffering in traditional Buddhism.

The question of freedom from suffering raises questions about the nature of suffering. In traditional Buddhism, there are three kinds of suffering: the suffering of pain, the suffering of change, and the suffering of existence. An example of the suffering of pain is burning one's hand on the stove. An example of the suffering of change is separation from one's spouse or the loss of a child. The suffering of existence is that slight edge or feeling of discomfort or dissatisfaction which persists even when one is happy and content. This three-fold division is a simple yet penetrating analysis of suffering: it explicitly recognizes physical, psychological, and spiritual levels of discomfort. It fails, however, to acknowledge the many different sources of psychological pain experienced in modern life.

In psychotherapy, the classification of suffering is more elaborate. Physical and emotional sources of pain are recognized along with complex interactions between them, such as pain that isn't consciously felt but manifests itself in body posture or in behavior. The analysis and taxonomy of pain in psychotherapy is more detailed than the comparable analysis in Buddhism but psychotherapy has only recently begun to include explicit recognition of pain stemming from spiritual issues.

Different Objectives

Another perspective is provided by considering the objectives of these two disciplines. In Buddhism, the goal is to awaken, to realize a state of mind free from ignorance about the nature of the self. There are many developmental descriptions in Buddhism: the Theravadin system of the Five Paths, the Mahayana Five Paths and Ten Stages of the Bodhissatva, the Four Stages of Mahamudra, the Sixteen Stages of Maha Ati, and so on.² In all of these there are precise descriptions of experiences which accompany the dissolution of ego-clinging. In all these systems, the student progresses through several stages: first, a stage of preparation during which he or she develops a strong motivation, an ethical basis, and meditation skills; next, a stage of accommodation which consists of familiarization with experiences of non-self, openness, and compassion; thirdly, a stage of insight in which direct experiential understanding of non-self takes place; then, a further stage of development in which that insight is progressively integrated into daily experience; and finally, the stage of culmination, in which the process of integration is completed. At this point, there is no longer any clinging to a mistaken sense of self. This is the aim of Buddhism, the dissolution of the ego-clinging

which is the basic cause or factor that produces suffering and pain.

In psychotherapy, and psychology in general, the picture is not as simple. There are many different descriptions and models. In some areas precise and effective tools exist for analyzing an individual and selecting appropriate therapeutic models and methods. In other areas, whatever works is the only recourse. The outcome or objective of treatment is not always well-defined. Is it purely to enable people to function as part of society (resocialization)? Is it to help people come to a clearer sense of themselves, possibly freeing them from the conditioned restrictions of family and society? Therapists and psychologists work with a wide range of people: dysfunctional individuals, psychopaths, schizophrenics, people trying to overcome the shock of separation or other traumas, people with neurotic disorders but who are basically functional in daily life, people working with role problems trying to integrate themselves more fully into the world. There is no single view which covers all these areas.

Difference in Focus

Thirdly, Buddhism and psychotherapy are generally directed at very different groups of people. With its universal focus, Buddhism, at least when it was first taught, was not directed at the resolution of the difficulties of daily life. The student of Buddhism was typically a person who wished to resolve the deepest questions about life and might have little concern for his or her role in society. Buddha Shakyamuni was such a person, leaving behind his responsibilities as a husband and heir to a kingdom to pursue a personal quest for ultimate meaning. In contrast, psychotherapists attempt to help individuals confronting a wide range of difficulties generally concerned with living, working, and the family. As Buddhism

developed institutional forms and a role in society, it increasingly found itself working with lay people. Conversely, recent psychotherapy has, for example, extended itself into “transpersonal” stages of development, extending the limits of what is usually meant by psychological health. Though the distinctions in the original focus of each may be overlapping, it is nevertheless helpful to keep them in mind.

Thus, Buddhism is a system of training with reasonably well-defined views of the world, aims, and methods which have generally focused on a universal resolution of suffering. In psychotherapy, there is a multiplicity of views, methods and intentions which tend to center on the alleviation of specific kinds of suffering by enhancing an individual’s development in the context of his or her life in society.

DIFFERENT CULTURES: MEMBERSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL

To appreciate further some of the differences between these two disciplines, it is helpful to consider the differences between membership and individual cultures. I feel that these differences have important implications for the way Buddhism develops in this country.

One of the most helpful models that I’ve found is Ken Wilber’s work, outlined in his books *Transformations of Consciousness* (Shambhala, 1986) and, from a different perspective, *No Boundary* (Shambhala, 1979). Wilber divides human development into three stages: the pre-personal, dealing with child development; the personal, from childhood through puberty into adulthood; and the transpersonal, a development beyond reference to the individual self. He has identified key factors common to transformation processes. It is a very useful scheme, though there are some questions it doesn’t answer.

One of those questions arises from the observation that spiritual development and psychological development are not sequential or even parallel processes. That is, it is quite possible

to have an individual with deep spiritual insight who, by Western standards at least, is psychologically immature. It is possible to have a person of considerable psychological maturity and sophistication who knows very little about the spiritual realm. It is possible to have a person who is well developed in both areas, and of course it is possible to have a person who is well developed in neither of those areas.

A straightforward example of this divergence can be found among the monks and teachers who have come from the East to live in this country. One, in particular, is a capable meditation teacher whose meditative ability and understanding were well respected in his home monastery. Out of devotion to his teacher, he came to the West, leaving his own culture behind, and took over a center in North America. He found himself dealing with areas of life that he had never had to deal with before: sexuality, power, etc. Basically he made a complete mess of it. From a Western view he was psychologically very immature: he had no relationship with sexuality so he acted like a teenager; he did not understand the limits and checks of power in our culture so a number of people were damaged. Many others could not accept what he did and dissociated themselves completely from Buddhism. Yet, when he talked about what he knew, i.e., how to meditate, and the experiences which arise from meditation, he spoke with clarity and understanding.

Many people associated with Buddhist centers in the West have the feeling that these centers have a disturbing record of harboring, and in some cases producing, dysfunctional people. Centers have, of course, helped many other people by providing the resources for spiritual training at a time when interest in spiritual development has been growing, but the track record is not all that good. I personally know of individuals who have regressed considerably through their exposure to Buddhism to the point that they are either on long term drug-therapy or have been institutionalized.

Why has this happened? A part of the problem lies in the misunderstanding on the part of both Easterners and Westerners about how to work with Western individualism in a spiritual context. Buddhism developed along with the other great world traditions at a time when most societies were agrarian. If I can borrow some of Wilber's terminology, they developed when the primary feature of society was "membership". There was less emphasis on being an individual and more on being a member of the society. This trait was a dominant part of our own culture until about three to five hundred years ago—the most radical points of departure being the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. Membership culture has persisted much more strongly in Mid-Eastern and Eastern countries. In such places, there is much greater strength in the family unit and the extended family. There is also much less choice in almost every facet of life. For example, a man generally follows the profession of his father and the woman is generally responsible for child-bearing and homemaking.

We started to move away from that pattern around the time of the Renaissance and certainly have continued to do so through the influence of industrialization. We find ourselves now well into the development of an information-based culture, while Buddhism, Hinduism and other Eastern religions are mainly taught by representatives of membership societies largely based on agrarian and feudal structures. This difference does not reflect on the insight, wisdom, compassion, and attainment of these individual teachers, but it does have implications about what happens in the interaction.

In membership cultures, everybody is a member from the top to the bottom. My own teacher, Kalu Rinpoche, even though he was recognized as a very special teacher in the Tibetan tradition, never regarded himself as separate from his culture. He accepted his responsibilities. His father was a lama before him. After spending years practicing in isolation, he accepted the role of teacher at the direct command of his

own teacher (Rinpoche himself wanted to stay in the mountains). In this way, he accepted his role in his culture. He devoted himself to teaching and supporting Buddhism for the rest of his life.

Here in the West, we have noticed that teachers from the East and Western individuals who come to a level of spiritual insight often see themselves as separate from this culture. They feel in some way above it and free from its limitations and obligations. Specific cases have resulted in tragedy and great difficulty for both the teacher and his or her students. As we grow up in this culture we are encouraged, even from an early age, to think of ourselves as individuals with the ability to define and pursue our own direction in life. Let us look at the way this orientation interacts with that of a person from a membership society.

Loyalty and Allegiance

Loyalty and allegiance constitute another area where there are significant differences between membership and individual cultures. Most membership cultures are feudal in structure. In a feudal culture loyalty is directed to the warlord because he is the source of protection: he has the ability to raise armies to protect his fiefdom of which one is a resident. Thus, one's primary loyalty is to him and he is paid in taxes and services. The same model extends into religious areas. This explains in part the considerable importance of teachers in Eastern traditions and the general role of the student as servant. The teacher is seen as the source of ultimate spiritual security so a student "pays" for that with appropriate devotion and service.

In Western culture, our primary loyalty isn't to an individual, because our primary security is not derived from any particular person. It lies in the social and political institutions upon which the country is based; in the case of the United

States, the Constitution and the governing bodies that have grown out of it. Hence, our primary loyalty is to those institutions and we pay taxes and render service to the government in exchange for their guarantees or our legal right. When we ignore or defy the rules set down by those institutions, we have broken the law, or have set ourselves outside the boundaries of the society.

In a feudal structure, because the clanlord makes the law, he is not accountable to it. What happens when we bring that kind of structure, albeit in the spiritual area, into our own culture? We may find that we are trying to follow a feudal structure in a "democratic" system. The conflict between this society's laws and mores on the one hand and the expectations and customs of an Eastern spiritual teacher on the other can create confusion and difficulties. Retreat centers are often built on the basis of invalid building permits, for example, and people have been "hired" but never paid for services because their service is seen as natural and due. Morally questionable or even, by governmental standards, illegal acts are justified on the grounds that they are being performed for religious purposes, or at the direction of the spiritual teacher.

This cultural tension becomes more serious when we look at the issue of authority. Implicit in the feudal structure is the fact that the source of security, the clanlord (or, in a religious context, the spiritual teacher) is the ultimate arbiter of what is legal or what is right. That principle clashes directly with our modern sense of "right and wrong" because such an individual seems to be above the law as we understand it. No one who has been brought up in this culture, where every person is subject to the laws of the country, rests easily with that kind of absolute authority, either consciously or unconsciously. Those of us who have accepted and trained in Eastern spiritual traditions also feel discomfort in this area, often without explicitly knowing why. In order to recognize the individual being of each person in our society, we have evolved a social system

which protects the “rights” of that person from arbitrary abrogation by anyone else. The recognition of individual liberties is much more limited in a feudal structure.

Individualism and Freedom of Choice

Individualism manifests in other areas also. We have radical individual expression in art. Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche himself said he was absolutely amazed at Western art. He had trained as an artist in Tibet where all figures are defined by precise proportions; exact styles are used for painting hands, faces, and so forth, and the scope for the individual artist is restricted. When he came to the West he found everybody splashing paint on the canvas anyway they thought they'd like to see it. He loved it!

Through our Western educational process, we become independent people. When we start to train in spiritual disciplines we expect a similar process. That particular expectation has been a source of pain and difficulty for some students because Eastern teachers have often not understood what their Western students were feeling. The teacher tends to say, “Your training isn't complete. You still have more to learn. You should do what I tell you.” The student tends to feel that he or she has understood something after what is often years of study, but that that understanding is not acknowledged or validated. Continued dependence on the teacher is assumed or encouraged in the Eastern perspective while recognition and the independence and trust which go with it are expected by the Western student.

An illustration of some of the topics presented here is provided by a person who came to see me after he had been involved with an Eastern religious group for several years. An intelligent and capable person, he had persistently felt discomfort at the prospect of becoming a resident of that group's

community and preferred to live and work in another city. Nevertheless, he found a great deal of value and insight in his interaction with the head of that community, a well-known and respected teacher in his tradition. He contributed directly to the organization both financially and through the donation of his considerable organizational skills. Matters came to a head when he was asked to participate in an enterprise which had raised both moral and legal questions for him. When he offered criticism, he found that, almost immediately, he no longer had the trust of his teacher or the same kind of access to him. His relationship with residents and members changed and, eventually, he came to the rather painful realization that he was no longer in the family. He felt used and exploited and resentful of the implication that the only way he could participate in the group would be to act in a way contrary to the principles that he had learned from his study with this teacher.

If we follow Ken Wilber's model, the development of individualism is a stage of development *beyond* membership cultures. We can find the seeds of that development within Buddhism itself. What is the essential thrust of Buddhism? It is to become a full individual—nothing else. It is to come to complete terms with one's mortality and one's being in the world. That, in a sense, is what enlightenment is. The people who have done that were very definitely individuals: Buddha Shakyamuni; in the Tibetan tradition Milarepa, Marpa, Tsongkapa, and others; in the Zen tradition Bodhidharma and Dogen and others. These were very strong individuals. They had become complete individuals, a considerable achievement in those cultures. In contrast, we are brought up to be individuals at the expense of, it sometimes appears, the stability of membership culture. Perhaps, then, this is the time for Buddhism to become a spiritual discipline that leads to the full development of the individual in a culture which fully supports individual growth. This is a very exciting prospect.

I mentioned earlier that one of the differences between a membership culture and an individual culture such as ours is the question of choice, the range of choices available to an individual. There is relatively little choice in membership cultures about clothes, home, profession, etc. There's a pattern to life, a safe pattern. In our culture we get up in the morning and we put on a bathrobe, we change for work, we come home from work and we put on our jogging suits and after that we change again and have dinner, then we may put on something more comfortable in the evening until we change into our bedclothes and go to sleep. A similar range of options is present in food, profession, leisure activity, and other areas of life. All this choice in our lives can be a source of difficulty for some people. Psychotherapists are aware that the ability to cope with a variety of choices is a developmental process which a given individual may not negotiate successfully. In America we have to choose what we want to be. In membership cultures, one generally follows one's father's profession or assumes the role of mother and homemaker. It is fair to suppose that the institution of psychotherapy and the need for it may be connected to the scope of choice in our society.

However, generally speaking, rather than Western individualism cultivating a stronger attachment to self, as it is often presented as doing, I believe it actually cultivates a more flexible sense of self. It has to do this in order to provide for the versatility necessary to make these choices. For example, teenagers are often described as going through identity crises. I don't think teenagers go through identity crises in the sense that they are trying to find out "who they are." A more accurate description might be that when people approach this particular period of life, they suddenly find themselves having to function in a variety of ways. They're no longer children, they aren't quite adults; they're beginning to have romantic and sexual relationships; there is peer pressure from classes, school, sports. Rather than not yet having found out who they

really are, we could say the problem is that they have not yet developed a sufficiently *flexible* sense of who they are so that they can adapt to all the different roles and demands being made on them. In this sense, the need to develop psychologically is greater than it would be for persons in a membership society, whose choices and roles are more limited.

DIFFERENT RESULTS

Buddhism as we noted above, from its interest in an ultimate release from suffering, sees the process of ego-clinging, the patterns of subject/object duality as the basic problem of life. Virtually all practices and methods in Buddhism are concerned with the resolution of ego-clinging. This does not mean the dissolution of self or ego, but the dissolution of the tendency to make it the central point of our relationship with experience. Subject/object duality, the felt sense of separation, is a false duality. The sense that I am here and you are there, and I am something and you are another thing which both exist independently of each other is seen as not true. It cannot stand up to even a rudimentary analysis. The Buddhist view of self goes even farther. Say you and I are just now looking at each other. At this moment, I am here only because you are looking at me. You are there because I am looking at you. If I wasn't looking at you, then you wouldn't have any existence in my experience. That's the actual state of things. That's why the subject/object duality is a false duality: the object of perception is dependent on the subject perceiving for its existence, and vice-versa.

There is however another kind of duality in our experience, which can be described in terms of form and emptiness, or relative truth and ultimate truth, or means and wisdom. That is, there are always two aspects to experience, the knowing or being aware of something on the one hand, and the "nothing there when we take a closer look" on the other. It's not quite

correct to say that this constitutes a duality, but we always have that kind of pairing.

In summary, spiritual development as described in Buddhism is primarily concerned with the dissolution of the felt sense of self, or, to put it another way, the felt separation from experience. Psychological development is more concerned with mental ease and how a person functions in the world. (What constitutes "functioning" is, of course, defined in different ways). Whereas Buddhism seeks the resolution of the problem of pain through the dissolution of felt separation, psychotherapy seeks the resolution of pain through the correction or completion of developmental stages which have not been properly negotiated. Further, as we have said, Buddhism, in the form in which we receive it from Eastern teachers, carries with it many of the forms and attitudes characteristic of membership societies. The interaction of those forms with Western individualism has produced situations in which both psychological and spiritual development have been impeded or distorted.

Both spiritual and psychological growth are necessary for full human development. Spiritual practice and development are areas where we have, as a culture, lost a lot of our traditional experience. That balance is now beginning to be recovered. Some feel that spiritual development is, by itself, sufficient. This is certainly the idea which we have received from many Eastern teachers. However, to think that this single focus will solve all our problems may be naive. We need to consider our full development in relationship to our world.

We could now ask the question whether there is an actual end to human development. In the Buddhist view, there is a progression of understanding to what we could call non-duality. This progression moves from a sense of separation from the world, and separation from ourselves, through meditation practice, to a final resolution. In meditation practice, such as shamatha/vipayshana, we realize that the idea of self we have is simply a construction, which does not correspond to any en-

tity that has substantial existence. When that kind of understanding is fully integrated, we no longer feel any sense of separation from the world. There are people, historically, who have been able to reach that level of non dualistic experience.

On the other hand, the complete resolution of psychological material, of all the different influences which limit us and prevent us from developing fully, doesn't necessarily have, from a theoretical perspective, any conclusion.

That leaves us in the interesting position that while we may reach a level of profound understanding, the implementation of that understanding in our lives may take forever to complete. In other words, there will always be new challenges to the fullest expression of the love, compassion, and awareness that we develop in our journey through life.

NOTES

- ¹ This is the Noble Eightfold Path which is divided into three areas: morality or behavior consisting of right speech, right livelihood, and right action; meditative stability consisting of right mindfulness and right meditative absorption, and knowledge consisting of right view, right conception and right effort.
- ² Descriptions of these developmental paths may be found, respectively, in Gampopa, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. Herbert V. Guenther (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1971); Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, *Tibetan Tradition of Tibetan Development*, trans. Khamlung Tulku and Sharpa Tulku (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1985); Takpo Tashi Namgyal, *The Quintessence of Mind and Meditation*, trans. Lobsang P. Lhalungpa (Boston: Shambhala, 1986); Jamyon Kontrul, *The Encyclopedia of Knowledge*, translation in progress.