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Buddhist Therapy

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Buddhist Therapy

Living in the 20th century, the word therapy is quite familiar to us, especially in connection with occupational therapy. Now, let us reflect for a moment, why so many people find occupational therapy so helpful—particularly in mental distress? Is it because it takes our mind off our worry?

According to Buddhism, however, occupational therapy is not a satisfactory solution to our problems. Buddhism is a way of life which helps us to look within—to dig deep inside us—right down to the core of trouble. While to take the mind off our worry is in fact nothing else but an escape, though it might work quite well for the time being, Buddhism is against all escapism. Instead, you must have courage to look at yourself the way a detached stranger might look at you and face up to your emotions—especially your anxieties—which are bound to come up in the process of your investigation. Only by accepting these at their face-value, can you ever hope to transcend them one day.

This, on the other hand, might give the impression that Buddhism is very closely related to psychology.

To some extent, yes, but with one tremendous difference. While psychology helps you to understand yourself intellectually and, at best emotionally, Buddhism helps you to get beyond the intellect to the actual experience of life itself. That's why applied Buddhism goes so much deeper than any school of psychology can ever claim to do. But how does one achieve this? The only way is through meditation and the practice of mindfulness—*satipaṭṭhāna*.

As I am not in a position to write on meditation, because I have not practised half enough myself, I shall just restrict myself to mindfulness as the cure of most suffering: Buddhist therapy.

In Buddhism we can apply mindfulness at
body,
feelings,
states of mind, and
contents of mind.

But as the actual suffering comes to us through bodily feelings (pain) and states of mind (emotions), I shall only deal with those two, in particular, with our emotions. But of course, great stress in Buddhism is also laid on mindfulness as to the body (watching your breathing, mindful walking) and as to the

contents of mind (watching your thoughts and images).

Bodily Feelings

The greatest suffering our body has to endure is through pain. In this case we nearly always look for help from outside: either we call the doctor or we get drugs or both. But what are we to do if we can't get any help from outside? Suppose we have such dreadful toothache that no pills will help at all. And the attack starts in the middle of the night, when no dentist is available. I'm sure many people will have had such an experience in the past. And most of us will have suffered agonies. Why? Because we didn't only have to suffer the pain itself—but also our various emotions round the pain; such as anxiety, self-pity, resentment, etc. But I am afraid it isn't even as simple as that. If we could just accept these things for what they are, our suffering could be greatly reduced, as I will try to explain later when I deal with mental suffering. But alas acceptance is our very weak point. Instead, the ego simply loves spinning cocoons round any- and everything. If the pain becomes too acute, we repress it, and thus we only suffer a double dose. The same happens to our emotions. So we can truthfully say that the real cause of our suffering is not the pain,

nor even the accepted fear of the pain—but the repressed fear. To quote Graham Howe: “Neurosis is nothing else but unadmitted fear.”

Now let us go back to just the bodily feeling of the pain: in our case: the tooth-ache. How can we help ourselves in the Buddhist way—that is to say, from within? Simply by concentrating wholly on the tooth-ache.

Doesn't this make it worse? Or isn't this too introspective? Too negative?

Yes, in the beginning you might actually increase the pain by concentrating on it, for no escapism is allowed. But when I say, concentrating, I mean watching it with detachment—not wallowing in it with your precious little ego as the centre. Now if you can really concentrate on nothing else but the pain for long enough, it will be greatly reduced, if not completely transcended. Why? Because by the sheer act of concentration you wholly accept your situation, however unhappy it might be. And if there is only the act of watching without a watcher in the centre—surely, this cannot be introspective, nor negative, nor positive.

States of mind

As I explained before, it is our emotions which cause our main suffering; whether they plague us on their own or in connection with the suffering of our body. Therefore, I want to deal now entirely with the suffering caused by our various states of mind-our various emotions.

When I made myself the guinea-pig of these investigations, I found that 6 states of mind seem to be responsible for my main suffering. They are:

Greed in general,

Greed for a bigger and better self,

Hurt pride,

Envy

Hatred, and

Anxiety.

Don't let us feel uneasy about them! Let us remember, they just constitute our ignorance—our Jungian shadow. Nothing more—nothing less. First, we may accept them intellectually without pinning labels to any of them. But perhaps I might be allowed to point out that of these 6 states of mind, anxiety is by far the most deadly of the lot. That's why I have reserved the last and longest section to anxiety which I will boldly call the core of all our mental suffering.

Greed in general

I feel greed is a very good example to illustrate that it is frustration far more than the greed itself which causes our suffering. Suppose I feel greed for a pretty frock in an Oxford Street shop window. It nearly buys me—but I manage to resist the temptation at the last minute. Now when the greed first occurred in the here-and-now, it was quite a pleasant sensation. But of course it didn't last long; not even as long as eating a cream-pastry, for my reasoning set in and I had to frustrate it. It was no good buying the frock—I simply didn't have the money. This hurt quite a bit. But more pain was to come. For my frustration increased as time went on, as it was still attached to that frock in the window. I just couldn't put it down. Every time the frock tried to appear in my mind accompanied by some feeling of pain, I pushed down my greedy emotion further and further, which only made matters worse. For the longer my greed is frustrated the longer I have pushed down my longing for the frock by pretending it was not really there—the greater the suffering. This is a sure way of becoming attached to my own attachment.

Now please don't make any mistake: All this is a purely intellectual understanding of the situation and as such it is of no use whatsoever while we are in the

grip of the emotion. For the grip is too strong to allow us to think reasonably at all. It will, no doubt, help us a little afterwards. It might even make us be less foolish next time. It might ... but let us be quite clear on one point: This intellectual reasoning is as far removed from mindfulness as I am from the man in the moon!

What is the main difference then? As I can only explain this intellectually, it is a very difficult task indeed. For mindfulness is a direct experience of life—a direct seeing of things as they are—and therefore it cannot really be rendered in concepts.

Through right mindfulness and right concentration the so-called reality which we usually give to all the objects we desire or hate drops off and just makes them into appearances; here one moment and gone the next. They become valueless phantoms.

Now if we apply mindfulness as to emotions—in our case, greed for the frock—through the absorbing process of watching, the central watcher (I), as well as the object (the frock), will suddenly disappear. In the end there will be just greed and nothing else, no classification, comparison, or judgement, just the seeing of the innocent eye. And this very seeing is the Buddhist therapy—the immediate cure of our suffering. It works even in the smallest instance and

the knowledge deep down that it works already makes the usual vicious circle unvicious. It also strengthens our faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—which is absolutely essential on the Buddhist path.

Greed for a bigger and better self

This is far more devastating to us than our greed in general—our greed for objects which have no direct bearing on our self-esteem. It stands to reason: if our ignorant belief in the ego constitutes our suffering, then any emotions, thoughts or actions tending to inflate this erroneous belief even more, will have grave consequences for us, not only in the present but also in the future. Imagine life as being like the current of a stream. If we try and swim against this current, it will soon catch up with us. We will exhaust and harm ourselves in the process until, in the end, we shall have learned our lesson the hard way.

Let me give you an example again: Suppose I want to become an actress—a famous actress. This is wrong from the very start. Why? Buddhism teaches us not to look at our action but at our motive behind the action: I want to become famous, “I want” is wrong and the clement of fame is worse still, for it stands for ego-boosting. You might argue here that the “I want”

cannot be avoided in life with its main-theme of the survival of the fittest.

But life should not be a game of grabbing and clinging. This is where we go completely wrong. Though its laws can be cruel and murderous, it is our mode of awareness which is the balancing factor in our life. The more we can reduce the centre figure of the self through right awareness, the more we reach the balance of the true centre: the middle way where the karmic laws no longer operate.

Perhaps, I have succeeded a little in showing you not only why my desire to become a famous actress is wrong—but also why any desire to become anything is equally wrong. What is the right motive then? Simply love for acting, without any scheming and machination of the ego. This, of course, is quite impossible for us unenlightened creatures. That is why we still have to cope with this round of endless rebirths. But we need not be disheartened, for we have the power to *purify* our motives bit by bit, as our insight into life as it is increases.

But now let us go back to the I which suffers. The I who wants to become a famous actress: who wants to be in the lime-light and thus have more so-called security in the ego. The I who wants to earn more money in order to satisfy more desires.

Again, as in the case of greed in general, as long as my desire to become a famous actress is not too much frustrated—as long as there is still the element of hope—my suffering is not too acute. But all the same, there is a constant amount of suffering—especially as it is unadmitted, repressed. But the more I fail in achieving this desire, the greater my suffering; and the greater my suffering, the more I repress; and the more I repress, the more acute my suffering. The vicious circle at its worst. When we can't bear this state of affairs any longer, we just go and change our set of desires and hope that this time we might be a little more successful. But what we don't understand is the fact that even the success of our desire is bound to bring suffering in the course of time. For desire—attachment—means running counter to the flow of life.

Suppose, I do become a famous actress, my desire doesn't stop there, for I have constantly to prove to myself and others that I really am a famous actress. And there are difficult relationships with my co-workers. The more difficult, the more inflated my ego becomes. And in the end—through illness, old age and maybe all sorts of other circumstances—my desire will be frustrated after all, unless these outside circumstances force me to surrender my desire myself.

But why wait for outside circumstances when you

can be your own maker and master from within? Watch your greed for a bigger and better self the way I described before. Turn the light onto the spot which hurts most, instead of pushing it into the dark labyrinth of the unconscious. And the seeing of the situation as it really is—not imagined by an imaginary self—is the one and only cure. The more the ego kicks in all directions and the more it complains bitterly, the more you must turn on the light. For his light shines from within, it is the insight into the true nature of things coupled with compassion for these things, including yourself.

Hurt pride

Hurt pride is the direct outcome of our erroneous ego-belief. The more inflated our ego—the greater our hurt pride. If we become so attached to this precious little I that we can only see and experience life from the point of view of this I right in the: centre of all things, we are asking for trouble. We simply have to get hurt all the time. It isn't only other people's actions or non-action which can hurt our ego, but any little critical remark might give us pain too. Especially if it comes from someone we love—someone we are attached to.

Again let me give you a little example:

One day my husband suddenly complained that I

had an aggressive way of arguing. I was quite a bit hurt there and then but soon I seemed to have forgotten all about it.

And then, quite suddenly, a few days later when I was sitting in an arm-chair resting after lunch, the whole scene presented itself again—practically word for word. I seemed to enter into the same emotions as I did when my husband made this unfortunate remark. My cheeks feel flushed and I suffer. New emotions got hold of me: that of anger—even hatred—for my husband.

Of course, while I have this attack of hurt pride I can't see it this way at all. Everything is distorted by my emotions and my consequent self-pity makes my suffering even worse. Then all of a sudden in a moment's lull, I remember to apply mindfulness. And, as usual, it works. For a few moments I manage to step out of my own shoes—my emotional shoes. And then, for the first time, the scene presents itself with a strange actress who seems to have taken my part. I have no longer anything to do with it. I'm just an onlooker. Everything seems suddenly different, rather absurd, almost funny. Is it really me sitting in the chair wallowing in warmed-up emotions? I burst out laughing. Having detached myself from my own self, I also detached myself from my emotions by going right through them as a neutral watcher ...

“That is all very well,” it might be argued. “Your husband’s criticism was not at all serious and maybe there was a little truth in it too. One shouldn’t be so touchy. But what about people who make really serious, wicked accusations which are quite unfounded? Surely, you can’t help feeling hurt about it!”

To this I just say: If you have overcome your wrong ego-belief, if you are completely detached from yourself and everything round you, nothing will hurt you any more. After all, hurt pride is only attachment to the so-called virtue of your so-called ego!

Envy

If you go in for either or both kinds of greed—the greed in general and the greed for a bigger and better self—in a big way, you will often find yourself stumbling over people who have got exactly what you desire yourself so ardently. Up will come the emotion of envy. And the more you are attached to things you cannot obtain—the more your greed is frustrated—the more likely it is for envy to arise.

Please, always follow me from the Buddhist angle which, as I pointed out before, is so much deeper than even the psychological. No excuses, nor self-accusations are allowed. Instead, we are just aware of

anything and everything which presents itself before our mind. And you will find that the unvicious circle can increase in volume just as much as the vicious. As our insight increases so does our faith in the Dhamma and vice versa. Thus slowly, but surely, our attachment to ourselves and the people and things around us decreases. We are getting healthier in mind and body.

By the way, it might be amusing to see that jealousy is really nothing else but also a kind of envy resulting from greed. I become attached to a person of the opposite sex. I want to possess him—to own him as I own my flat. Now if another woman receives some of his attentions which I desire all for myself, I feel jealous. I envy her this man of mine! It's as simple as that. Actually, if you look at these emotions without labelling them with nasty adjectives, such as sinful or wicked—this can become quite an amusing game. So long as you don't get attached to the game, of course.

If the feeling of envy becomes terribly strong, it might even develop into hatred. Take, for instance, our example of the greed for a bigger and better self. Suppose I don't become the famous actress I desire so much, but instead, my school-friend Susan does. All my ambitions in this direction get frustrated, while Susan seems to climb to the top almost effortlessly. I think, this is a clear case for the arising of hatred. The

amount of hatred I repress, though, will only intensify my suffering. But I think, at this point we'd better leave envy and go over to hatred proper....

Hatred

Hatred, we might say, is like a whirlpool in the stream of life. Hatred arises towards any person who stands between my ego and my desire. But in this case the emotion of desire can be felt positively as well as negatively. If my school-teacher makes me do a sum I don't want to, I hate him. I feel, so to speak, desire for not doing the sum. To make things even more complicated, we might say that hatred for a person in itself is a negative attachment. I just can't put him down—in a similar way as I can't put down a person I love; only with much more unpleasant emotion. This might, perhaps, illuminate a little the Buddhist teaching of kamma which claims that we are to meet in our next rebirth those people we are specially attached to by love or hatred in this life. A rather gruesome thought, I always think ...

Because hatred makes us suffer severely—for already the emotion itself is completely out of step with the harmony of life—we repress it as much as we can. And if we do accept it, we usually hate ourselves for it, which is nothing else but a negative attachment

to our ego.

It is here, I feel, that Buddhism is so unique compared with all other religions in its profound wisdom. No Christian self-mortification in any shape or form, as the Buddha had proved on his own mind and body, to both opposites constitute attachment: self-love, as well as self-hatred. Only the complete abandoning of the illusory self in the middle way—only true detachment—is man's liberation from all suffering.

Anxiety

As I said right in the beginning, anxiety is the most deadly of all our emotions. Why? Because it is bred from our feeling of insecurity. And the root-cause of this insecurity is our old friend attachment.

When Dr. Suzuki says so wisely that our trouble starts from the movement of the arising of the consciousness of "this and that," he implies our suffering through attachment. The very moment I artificially place the ego in the centre of the Universe, I start discriminating between this and that. And by so doing I am attached. So we might say: The arising of the consciousness of this and that produces the force of attachment.

The various emotions I have just discussed, spring from various definite attachments—but our constant feeling of insecurity which produces anxiety in general, springs directly from the force of attachment. The second of the Four Noble Truths: The origin of suffering is craving! Once we have established this, we can go further by saying that as we are so strongly attached to this life—to a great extent because we are afraid of the unknown in the state of death and afterwards—a great deal of anxiety can be traced back to the death-fear in us. But, of course, this death-fear too has its roots in the force of attachment.

Now, for me anxiety always shows itself in the form of an emotional cramp. If it is strong enough, it produces a physical cramp as well. And when it's on its way out through the act of watching, it usually leaves me with an intellectual cramp as its farewell present. The remainder of my mental cramp quickly moves into my thoughts until I seem to ride I around on them like on a rocking-horse in a merry-go-round. It took me quite a while to I find this out—but now I can always trace this as a definite pattern repeating itself again and again. All these various cramps are, of course, part and parcel of the original cramp of attachment, manifesting itself through various channels according to its intensity. This is important to know, for then we don't get sidetracked so easily by

the various labels we ourselves seem to stick on to this cramp or attachment.

After this elaborate analysis of the attachment I simply must warn you, or rather encourage you: Because I've just put it all down in concepts for our brain to understand it doesn't mean this attachment exists in reality. Its only existence is in our illusory mind—let us make no mistake about this. Thus, we even get cramped about this very cramp. We cling to our own anxiety—we fear our own fear. But once we have broken right through this illusion of the mind—if only for a short time—the cramp will dissolve completely in all its forms for the time being, leaving us wondering what the fuss was all about. But I shall come to this more fully presently.

Now let us go back to our Samsāra again to our vale of tears.

Suppose the force of attachment shows itself first in the form of a general feeling of uneasiness. What do we usually do with this glowing cinder? We immediately start feeding it with thoughts—all sorts of thoughts. Our head gives this general feeling of anxiety a label and thus transforms it into my special anxiety—as distinct from yours. For example: Will I be able to tackle this and that job tomorrow? Now had we not fed the cinder with suitable coals, it might have

slowly burn out by itself, instead of growing into a little fire.

But sometimes, worse still, the fire becomes bigger and bigger until it threatens to get out of hand. What has happened? I have been suffering so much anxiety that suddenly besides all my other fears, I start fearing my very anxiety. I get, in my despair, attached to my own attachment. But this, of course, is so subtle that my consciousness is not aware of it.

Again, mindfulness-detachment is the cure for any anxiety. But I have to realise that, though my anxiety might leave me for the moment, it is liable to come up again—either with the same or with a different label. Due to my *kamma-vipāka* the same pattern of ignorance will present itself to me for a long time to come. But it will continue to decrease in intensity, the deeper my experiences get and, consequently, the more my insight grows. My new *kamma*—my reactions to *vipāka*—will become more and more wholesome,

when my particular anxiety becomes just anxiety
and,

when it disappears altogether for the moment.

Sometimes I even catch anxiety before I put the label on and then it is definitely easier to deal with. But sometimes my cramp of anxiety seems to get worse,

instead of better. What went wrong? I am so set on my goal: the goal of freeing myself from suffering, that—besides my cramp of anxiety—I am also cramped with attachment to my goal. The ego wants detachment and thus only adds a new attachment to all the others. What am I to do?

In such a case the answer for me invariably is lack of faith. Faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

Here one might ask: “But what do I do to get this faith?”

I’m afraid this question is wrong from the start, because the ego can never get any faith. The only thing it can do is to humble itself not before other people—but before itself. After all, the ego stands for ignorance and the acceptance of this is humbling. Consequently, there will also be a true acceptance of my suffering and thus my ego will be silenced for a longer spell. This will result in the immediate cessation of suffering for the time being.

Now let us pause here for a moment to consider why true acceptance of suffering is the one and only cure, while repression only makes our suffering very much worse. This is hard to explain conceptually—but I will try.

Repression seems to me nothing else but a

continuation of my attachment in the sub- or unconscious level of the mind. Somehow, I always imagine the unconscious as a huge pantry where I store unpleasant things I don't want to face. When the smell gets too bad, however, I hurriedly open the pantry just for a second to take the most rotten piece out—only to lock it up again immediately. But the real trouble lies in the fact that I am still attached to all these emotions in the pantry, in spite of being out of my conscious reach. And in order to keep them locked up there, I need a lot of energy which only increases my state of suffering.

Now acceptance—true Buddhist acceptance—on the other hand, constitutes detachment, for the I is no longer on the scene to be attached to. It is as simple as that, and yet the hardest thing for the ego to bear.

Let us throw the final flash-light once more onto the true acceptance of our suffering through anxiety. As I tried to explain before, the mere act of acceptance already contains the cure: the cessation of suffering. For when the ego is out of the way, volition ceases too. We are no longer attached to: "I want to" or "I don't want to." Therefore true acceptance is detachment.

Now during this cessation all our energy, which is usually needed for our ego-make-believe, becomes released. No longer is our line with the whole

Universe blocked. *Metta* and *karuna* can, at last, flow backwards and forwards unhindered. By going right through suffering to non-suffering we find the unspeakable bliss of peace—the peace that passes all understanding. For the time being, we are cured of our cramp of anxiety!

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