

A few Thoughts on Buddhism and Psychology

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It appears that more and more interest in the relationship of psychology and psychotherapy to Buddhism has begun to appear in reading and discussion within the last ten years. It is not hard to understand why this is so, as Western psychology has been the source of contemporary religious vernacular, particularly in regards to Buddhism and Eastern spiritual traditions.

Based on the language used, it seems that psychology and Buddhism converge very neatly. This apparent convergence of approaches to the psyche rests on the assumption that there is a significant overlap between Buddhist and Western psychologies. I suggest, however, that this apparent overlap is for the most part created by what seems on the surface to be an identity of language and focus. Both traditions emphasize the importance of insight, are concerned with the individual, the nature of the psyche, and both deal with existential issues. However, it may be that there is very little overlap; that Buddhist psychology is profoundly different from Western models, and has been poorly understood in the attempt to appropriate what is a radically different ontology and view of reality.

This is important in a lot of ways. For one, if this distinction is not understood, meditators undertaking Buddhist practices (or psychotherapists attempting to incorporate Buddhism into psychotherapy) are likely to do no more than recreate the familiar and thus fall into a shallow and very limited practice.

Let's distinguish what Buddhist psychology is not. It is not a continuation of (Western) clinical psychotherapy or psychodynamic processes, nor is it a practical program geared towards adaptation to daily life.

What it is:

1. It is a practice that involves an inquiry into the essentially fictive, mirage-like nature of the self. What is unquestioned in Western psychology is a basic form of inquiry for the Buddhist. The self is not taken as a continuous, inherently existing structure, but as aggregations of discontinuous sensory data, which give the misleading appearance of

stability and continuity. As such it is a psychology which is fundamentally an inquiry into ontology, into what is real. An investigation into the nature of the self leads inevitably to the investigation of that which lies beyond the self-structure, to Being rather than becoming.

2. It is a system with a clearly articulated goal or end point and an explicit path leading to that end point. The goal is Nirvana, the utter and complete extinction of all phenomena that obscure reality and lead to suffering. The path is a process of continuous inquiry into the true nature of experience, a process contained within a calm and stable mind.

Unlike psychotherapy, it is not a project of the wounded self. It is instead a deconstruction of the self. This is a central point, and one that seems to be easily misconstrued. Meditative practice and the philosophy and psychology that parallel it are not about becoming a "better person." To the contrary, the goal of meditative practice is to be free of the "person," insofar as this personhood stands in the way of a clear understanding and experience of being. It is about seeing through clinging to what the Buddha called the "doctrine of self." In Dogen Zenji's words, "To study Buddhism is to study the self; to study the self is to go beyond the self; to go beyond the self is to be enlightened by all phenomena."

This is no small project, and the implications are radical. As one person in my meditation group said, "This flies in the face of everything I've been doing my whole life!" To see beyond self is to glimpse a world that is very different from the one we take for granted. In fact, you could argue that Buddhism is radically counter-intuitive. I mean this in the sense that it is intuitively obvious that the world is flat, that the sun revolves around it, and that "I" am a substantial, autonomous, and continuous presence. However what if none of the above is true, and the conclusions drawn from the evidence of the senses can't be relied upon? What if things are not as they seem, and our entire way of explaining things is a product of profound ignorance?

Maybe it's better to start a discussion about Buddhist psychology after asking these questions. If these questions are not asked, we will most likely create conceptual models based on unquestioned assumptions about the nature of things. It is the function of Buddhist psychology and philosophy to question assumptions on the apparent nature of things and to provide an alternative corrective perspective based on actual meditative experience. Meditation is therefore to be seen as part of this process of inquiry into how we know what we know.

Buddhism has been described as a knowledge system based on discovery rather than a religion. This begins with the Buddha's warning not to take anything on faith, nor to subscribe to any belief system. This central dictum is often ignored by our tendency to unknowingly revert to the familiar process of setting goals and striving to achieve them. The kind of inquiry central to the meditative project is always going to be sabotaged by the unquestioned belief that meditation is about accomplishing something, whether it's quieting the mind or getting enlightened. This tendency to create goals and strategies is often embedded in the ways in which meditation itself is presented as a series of techniques that lead to predictable results. How are we to understand meditation if it is not about accomplishing anything? This is a question that cannot be answered by the self, because it is the self that creates goals, devises strategies, and struggles to attain them.

When we talk about Buddhist psychology we are talking about a system that goes beyond the self. It includes conceptuality and theory but goes beyond them as well. Unlike Western models, Buddhist psychology is not a distinctly separate category from philosophy, ontology, epistemology, or yogic practice. It is rather a different inflection that focuses on certain aspects of experience that other approaches may not emphasize as much. It is not a meta-psychology that seeks to explain what cannot be directly experienced; to the contrary, it is a system that for the most part is highly suspicious of conjecture of any kind. We could say that it is based on the analysis of conditionality, "which is free of the two extremes [of nihilism and eternalism] and devoid of an independent agent and experiencer." (Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Great Discourse on Causation)

This, Toto, is not Kansas. We are on unfamiliar ground here because the basic category of Western psychology, the "independent agent or experiencer," is seen here as the locus and source of all suffering. Modifying or adapting the self, gaining insight into the self-construct, establishing a relationship between the self and the Self, or resignation to a life of tolerable neurosis are simply beside the point. In fact, these strategies are seen as fundamentally wrong-headed. They are all wrong-headed because a fictive, confused self produces them all. This means that the methods we will use to try to escape suffering are the very ones that create suffering to begin with.

There is consequently an identity between suffering and what the Buddha calls the "doctrine of self." This suffering is caused by desire or attachment, this attachment is sustained by fixed views, and primary among these fixed views is the "skein" of unexamined assumptions and

theories that we experience as a self. In the same way that we can mistake a coiled rope for a snake, these assumptions and theories operate to create the impression of "me" and "mine" that does not bear up under close examination.

Self-experience can be compared to a mirage in that upon first seeing it; it presents itself as something self-existent and real. Just as we see a lake in the desert and assume that it is what it appears to be, when we approach more closely, at some point it will evaporate. Stepping back from that perspective will lead to the "lake" now reconstituting itself. Only now, we see that it is a mirage of a "lake" rather than an actual lake. Even though it will re-appear as a "lake" again and again, we now know it for what it is. If we claim that we have discovered that the water does not exist, that is an absurd statement because the mirage has nothing to do with water. In the same way, when we approach the self in a process of sustained meditative inquiry, it will tend to reveal its true nature as a mirage by disappearing. When we suspend the investigation, it will reappear. To say that there is "self" is granting substantial existence to the mirage; while, on the other hand, to say there is "no self" is akin to claiming that the experience of a mirage is not real. As the Yogacara philosopher Vasubandhu put it, to say that there is no self is a denial, and to say that there is a self is a superimposition.

It follows that the "self" engaged by the therapist has to be understood for what it is. Some kind of on-going meditative practice is therefore a prerequisite. Since meditative experience is clarified in Buddhist philosophy, it is also important to become familiar with Buddhist thought and its history. Without this, Buddhist psychology becomes just another set of theories, assumptions and hypotheses. One that appears to be truer than other approaches, but still capable of producing confusion.

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