

BUDDHISM AND MENTAL HEALTH

By Alec Robertson

MENTAL HEALTH is a priceless and invaluable possession which is an essential prerequisite for happiness and peace of mind in the modern world. But unfortunately today all too many are losing this most precious gift.

Despite the vast strides and startling progress made by science in unravelling the mysteries of the universe and providing the human race with material comforts and worldly needs, the paradox is that today more people are suffering from mental ill-health and personality disorders than ever before. It has been estimated that the percentage of neurotics and the mentally sick in present day society has assumed alarming proportions, so much so that one out of every four persons in the world's great cities is in need of psychiatric treatment. It is said that in the United States one in ten people are mentally ill or suffer from emotional instability and less serious mental disorders to some degrees. A similar situation, though usually less serious, exists in other nations of our modern western society.

But why? Is it natural to be mentally or emotionally ill? Modern man believes that if he can have high living standards, a good income, more leisure time, education and the freedom to seek pleasure at will, he could automatically be happy. Today more people are experiencing these conditions than ever before. And the result? "Instead of health, these conditions have led to an unprecedented increase of mental disease and even to new forms of mental disorder..." so said Dr. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a noted Canadian psychiatrist, before 400 doctors and psychiatrists gathered at a widely-acclaimed symposium on schizophrenia held in Shreveport, Louisiana, some months ago. Something is clearly missing in modern man's pursuit of happiness and peace of mind. Something is causing his appalling mental illness.

One of the chief causes of mental ill-health is that modern man is drifting hopelessly in this materialistic age, without a real purpose in life. He is completely overwhelmed and without any definite goal and swept off his feet by the fleeting pleasures of this contemporary world and as a result, he is afflicted with mental and emotional disorders.

The other reasons are the sense of insecurity arising from material economic discord; the feeling of instability engendered by excessive competition in commerce and industry, with booms, slumps, redundancy and unemployment; the fear of nuclear war, the striving to keep up socially and financially with others; the vast disparity between different income levels combined with a

general desire to adopt the manner of life of the more privileged groups, sexual repression which is at the same accompanied by continual erotic titillation in the mass-media. All these and a host of subsidiary phenomena related to them are characteristic of our age. Not least among them as a disturbing influence is the need to feel personally important in a civilization which denies importance to anyone.

Though these external factors are partially responsible, yet according to Buddhist psychology, the causes are deep-seated and far-reaching and are found within the recesses of a person's mind. Incidentally, modern psychology draws a sharp line of demarcation between a normal and abnormal person. But according to Buddhism, all of us are subject to some form of emotional disturbances and psychological disorders most of the time.

Suffering which is the chief ailment afflicting all beings, is not only physical suffering alone but predominantly psychological suffering in the form of frustration, worry, fear, despair, discord agitation, etc.

The Buddha has made the significant and profound statement that a person may be physically healthy for one year, two years, even fifty or a hundred years but except for the perfect saints (Arahats) there is no one who is mentally healthy even for a second.

From this statement of the Buddha it is clear that though many of us may enjoy good physical health for a number of years we are harassed and pestered throughout our lives by various types of anxieties, fears, worries and other emotional disturbances. The psychological factors which cause suffering are attributed by the Buddha to five main causes which are as follows: sensual lust and sex, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry and doubts.

The mind of a person afflicted with these mental defilements is graphically and strikingly described in the Buddhist texts by the following similes; sensual lust and sex is compared with water mixed with manifold colours, ill-will with boiling water, sloth and torpor with water covered by mosses, restlessness and worry with agitated water whipped by the wind, doubt with turbid and muddy water. Just as in such water one cannot perceive one's own reflection so in the presence of these five mental defilements one cannot clearly discern one's own benefit nor that of others, nor that of both, as the mind is confused and mentally unbalanced.

If the cause of suffering is primarily psychological, then it must follow as a natural logical sequence that the cure also is psychological. Therefore we find in Buddhism, a technique and method, a series of mental exercises or psychological treatments designed to cure the various mental diseases. In the sphere of psychiatry and psychoanalysis science is yet floundering with its

theories and hypotheses. The limited nature of its success is indicated by the need to resort to physical treatment in cases that have passed from neurosis to psychosis, such as electro-convulsive therapy for acute depressive moods, insulin injections for early stages of split personality, frontal lobotomy for prolonged anxiety states and the use of the class of drugs known as tranquilisers which act upon the vegetative inter-neurotic circuits of the brain.

In *marked* contrast to the hit-and-miss methods and experience of western psychiatry, Buddhist mental therapy aims at the total integration of the personality at a higher level. Since craving in its various manifestations is the root cause of mental derangement, it is, therefore, necessary to diminish and finally extinguish it. It is here that Buddhism introduces an infallible remedy which western psychotherapy has been unable to fit comfortably into its fields of theory: the field of *ethical* values.

The understanding of the facts of impermanence, of suffering which is the result of craving and non-ego brings about a re-orientation of the mind which is characterized by greater detachment, psychological stability and moral awareness. This cannot be brought about by external means but an inner change and revolution of the mind. The Supreme Buddha diagnosed the diseases that afflicted all human beings.

The three main diseases are greed, (*lobha*) hatred (*dosa*) and ignorance (*moha*) and He prescribed infallible remedies for them. These prescriptions or techniques of meditation – forty in number – are mentioned in the sacred texts. They cover every type of psychological need and every possible combination of temperament. They are prescribed by the Teacher just as treatment is given by the psychiatrist. The mode of treatment is in accordance with the individual requirements of the patient.

It is to cure the mental ailments of suffering humanity that the All Compassionate Buddha – the psychiatrist par excellence – has given various prescriptions or forms of mental therapy (*kammattanas*). The Visuddhi Magga mentions six main types of temperaments (*carita*) which include many lesser ones. They are: those disposed to lust, hate, infatuation, faith, intellectuality and discursiveness. As temperaments differ, so do the subjects of meditation (*kammathanas*). One comes across these subjects of meditation scattered in the Pali texts, specially in the Discourses.

THE VISUDDHI MAGGA describes forty of them. They are: Ten objects called *kasina*, ten objects of impurity (*asubha*), ten recollections (*anussati*), four sublime states (*brahma vihara*), four formless states (*arupa*), one perception (*ekasanna*), and one analysis (*vavatthan*). As to suitability, it is said that the ten impurities and mindfulness of the body are ideally suited for one of a passionate temperament, the four sublime states and the four colour *kasinas* are for the

irritable, mindfulness on in-and-out breathing for the deluded and discursive, the first six recollections for the faithful, and for the analysis of the four primary elements and the perception that food is repulsive. The remaining *kasinas* and the formless states are suitable for all types of temperaments.

Though a particular type of meditation would suit a particular temperament, the Buddha being an incomparable physician, gives several subjects of meditation or techniques of treatment to individuals so that the various mental defilements which cause mental ill-health would be radically remedied. This technique and individual method is clearly brought out in the Maha Rahulavada Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya, a discourse which was preached to His son Rahula. The Buddha says:

“Develop the meditation on loving kindness (**metta**) Rahula, for by this, ill-will is banished.

“Develop the meditation on compassion (**karuna**) Rahula, for by this, cruelty is banished.

“Develop the meditation on sympathetic joy (**mudita**), Rahula, for by this, envy or jealousy is banished.

“Develop the meditation on equanimity (**upekkha**) Rahula, for by this, restlessness is banished.

“Develop the meditation on the concept of impermanence (**anicca-sanna**), Rahula, for by this, pride of self (**asmimana**) is banished.

“Develop the concentration on mindfulness on in-and-out breathing with mindfulness, Rahula, which developed and frequently-practised bears much fruit and is of great advantage.”

An important fact emerges from this discourse and that is that it is always better for a person to practise more than one type of meditation in order that he could effectively eradicate the deep-rooted and deep-seated diseases of the mind which continue to pester and harass him persistently. However, he should assiduously practise and specialise in a subject of meditation which suits a predominant and dominant trait of his personality as enumerated above.