

# PSYCHOTHERAPY IN BUDDHISM

By Dr Henry Weerasinghe

*“In terms of Buddhist psychology, we are who generally described as worldlings (putthujana) are mental patients until such time as when we become capable as a result of cognitive, and affective aspects of mind-culture to transcend the ills of our mind to experience the bliss of full freedom comparable to that of a Fully Perfected One. In other words, except for the Perfected Ones, we all are psychiatric cases of one form or other.” Having made this startling statement, the author of this excellent article sets out to show in simple language how the Buddha pre-empted the “latest” discoveries of modern psychiatry by 25 centuries. Quoting from a wide array of Suttras the author shows how the Buddha’s teachings contain explanations for every kind of mental illness known to modern man. He argues that Buddhism also advocates the cures for mental illness (at least at the early stages when the patient still has some control over his faculties) through the different kinds of meditation developed by the Enlightened One. Meditation certainly is a time-honoured exercise to help men live life to the fullest and at peace with themselves. Dr. Henry Weerasinghe is Senior Lecturer in Buddhist Studies at the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.*

- Ed. -

Although the total personality of an individual is made up of a material part called a body and a psychical component generally known as mind, the latter is central to his life on earth, the survival of impending calamities, and the maintenance of all important social, cultural, political and economic relations with others in the society. According to the Buddha, the mind is central to man in the sense that man is a thinking animal and his happiness or misery amidst mankind depends on his way of thinking. If he trains himself to think and act with a morally wholesome frame of mind, he reaps the benefit of happiness while what is contrary to this criterion would hurl him into a state of misery. The Buddha time and time again stresses that our thinking precedes thoughts and our thoughts in turn precede actions. So thinking is at the crux of our total behaviour. If we think irrationally with a bad motive our behavior becomes revolting and harmful to us as well as to others. At the same time if we think with a good motive our pattern of behavior becomes a wholesome one worthy of emulation. So rightful thinking presupposes

a rightful state of mind or a healthy mind. The important question here is whether we possess a healthy mind all the time or whether we are in a healthy frame of mind at all.

According to the teachings of the Buddha, the bodily part of the human personality may persist for some time; say even up to as many as hundred years with no affliction by diseases. But he says with great emphasis that it is impossible to see mind without an affliction or disease even for a second (A. II : 157). Briefly stated in terms of Buddhist psychology we who are generally described as worldlings (*puthujjana*) are mental patients until such time as when we become capable as a result of cognitive, and affective aspects of mind-culture to transcend the ills of our mind to experience the bliss of full freedom comparable to that of a Fully Perfected One (Arahant). In other words except for a Perfected One, we all are psychiatric cases of one form or other.

Modern medical sciences trace the causes of many different kinds of mental disorders to the feeling zone of mind. The unsettled nature of the mind stemming from excessive anxiety, tension, unhappiness, fear, or confusion without apparent causes is traceable to a certain type of disturbance of human emotions. Susruta held that passions and strong emotions might cause not only mental illness, but even bodily ailments for which surgery might be required. (D.S. Clark: *Psychiatry Today*, P.15). Hippocrates, the father of modern medical science, who lived in Greece during the fifth century B.C. thought that emotional disturbances are largely responsible for bodily diseases. (ibid).

The science of mind-healing in modern terminology deals with patients who manifest abnormality in behavior particularly stemming from some sort of malfunctioning of thinking processes due to one reason or other. Psychiatrists or the special category of doctors who do investigate, diagnose and treat them are of opinion that the disturbances in the functioning of mind in such patients are rooted in certain kinds of emotional upsets. In modern parlance, psychiatry is a clinical approach to curing such patients not by the use of traditional drugs as is the case with patients suffering from bodily diseases but with the intelligent utilization of certain psychological techniques applicable to the treatment of mental patients.

What causes bizarre disturbances in human emotion? How does a normal human being become upset emotionally? Are the causes internal or external? Who is responsible for the disturbance of human emotion which results in unhappiness and misery to the victim? Briefly stated, certain emotional disturbances are self-made mainly owing to ignorance of facts behind them. As an example, many different

kinds of phobias namely, fear to travel by air, to walk in darkness, to bathe in a river, to see blood and many similar instances may be cited. Most other emotional disturbances or tensions stem from society at large. Examples are many. Think of those people who have recovered from so-called repulsive bodily illness such as cancer, tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, leprosy or amputation (ibid. 12). The social stigma attached to these diseases is so disgusting that our society is not prepared to accept victims with the respect they used to enjoy before they were afflicted. They are supposed to be the worst patients who suffer from the terrible pangs of tension and mental sickness.

Most of the emotional upsets, if not all, are traceable to frustrated or inhibited goals of life. Buddhist and Freudian psychological information remarkably testify to this assumption.

Mind, according to the teachings of the Buddha is a reservoir of energy. This storage of energy is known as craving. This energy chamber is constantly being stirred up by three basic drives, namely lust (*raga*), anger (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). The peculiar nature of lust is seeking after that which is pleasurable to the five sense organs; eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body. These sense organs get attached to beautiful forms, alluring sounds, pleasant smells, palatable taste and enjoyable physical contact. The moment you try to prevent someone from enjoying gratification from them, the subject gets enraged in the manner of a poisonous snake. On the other hand, if the subject is allowed the full privilege of enjoying the bliss of his desires, he becomes excessively elated. (766-767 Sn.) The other two drives namely anger and delusion give lust a helping hand to act and react in an irrational manner so that more often than not the subject in the process becomes a mere physical wreck.

In certain situations, the social position of the individual does not allow him scope to act rashly towards others. In those circumstances what usually happens is that the subject becomes too much involved mentally in what he could not achieve. There are many interesting instances recorded to this effect in Buddhist texts.

The story of Nanda Thera is a good example of one who became mentally sick being unexpectedly deprived of his desired marriage to Janapada Kalyani. Nanda, as is well known, was forced to don robes due to his respect towards the Blessed One. The fact that he was so attached to his fiancée stood in the way of his making up his mind to practise the Buddhist way of release. He could not make any progress until he was guided to get out of that mental groove through a psychological device strong enough to counteract his persisting anxiety. Diversion

of attention towards another strong stimulus, it is said, was proved effective in beating down tension that caused much pain to Nanda. Does not this method very well agree with modern techniques of psychotherapy? The more the patient is allowed to brood over details associated with the cause of his tension the more he becomes involved in it and eventually he turns out to be a real mental patient.

The pain of deep sadness can cause not only anxiety but even madness. Owing to excessive despair and sadness Patavara, a beautiful girl who lost parents, husband and child in one stroke went mad. In her insanity she ran hither and thither naked and eventually she ran in the direction of Jetavana Temple where the Buddha resided. Though not in her senses as she came near the Temple, the Buddha's compassionate words 'regain mindfulness, sister' (*satim patilabha bhagini*) worked on her miraculously so that she became conscious. A large part of her anxiety and sadness vanished making her sorrow-stricken heart lighter. (ibid 91). That wisely devised interpersonal dialogue with a mentally sick patient could give him a wonderful release and confidence is an accepted clinical approach in modern medical sciences.

Medical sciences are positive that many somatic diseases are psychogenic. Ulcers in the heart and intestines, chronic pains in the body as well as malignant headaches the doctors say result from mounting tensions and stresses. Neurologists trace the high pitched tensions to irregularity of brain waves which maintain the rhythmic balance between mind and body. Although a certain degree of tension is fundamentally important for the smooth functioning of the human machine, too much of it causes the victim insurmountable difficulties.

States of mind created by food, weather conditions, stimuli and even drugs (more often than not intoxicating drugs) cause the safety valves of the human machine known as brain waves to get disturbed more easily. Of the four types of known brain waves; Beta waves (stress), Alpha waves (calm and stability), Theta waves (sleep), and Delta waves (deep sleep) the first is said to be the one that can cause much harm to the victim if the excessive flow of tension is not curbed by suitable clinical devices. It is one reason the doctors say why a patient suffering from too much tension is first made to relax or sleep under a suitable drug before doing anything to cure him of other complications that accompany high tension. The essence of modern psychotherapy lies in the importance given to calming down the mind before even settling to a diagnosis of the root cause of mental disorders. As is well known, psychiatrists and psychotherapists use for this purpose techniques such as friendly conversation and intimate dialogues etc. to elicit information that may reveal the root causes of mental disorders.

Presumably it is correct to say that most of the mental disorders originate from high pressure or high tension caused by imbalance in the brain waves. From the Buddhist point of view, there are five distinct causes that can give rise to tension and stresses in the human mind. Yielding to too much of sense desire or hunting for gratification of five senses with corresponding stimuli; forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and physical contact could cause hypertension. Meeting with disappointments in pleasure-hunting could cause untold conflicts and miseries. Mass scale suicide and instances of planned genocide are cases in point. Ill-will is another common cause of tension. If one carries with him the thoughts of omissions and commissions of people in society one tends to be always in a state of tension. The Buddha says, "If one were to brood over always that 'he scolded me, he insulted me and he sarcastically or scornfully laughed at me', ill-will in him is bound to increase." (DH. V.3) This is the case with modern man. Tension caused by anger is more terrible than that caused by any other psychological reasons. No more evidence is required to testify to this view than the increasing trends of premeditated crimes in modern society.

Sloth and torpor, hurry and flurry as well as doubt are other possible causes of tension. Sloth and torpor could cause moral indignation though they are always not revealed to the full public glare. Restlessness is said to be the chief cause of tension in man in modern society. Cases are far too many to mention. Doubt in oneself as well as in others is a possible strong cause that tends to demoralize the self and society without exception.

Cases of not only man rising against man but nations against nations have become so common that the modern world seems held in suspension in the face of roaring ripples of doubts and suspicious. Look at the great nations in world politics who, while camouflaging the realities of the true needs of peace try to negotiate for the settlement of the arms race but only evade the problems at stake. Mutual doubts and suspicion are a breeding ground not only for tension and stress both within and without the individual but they are even a threat to the very survival of nations. The modern world is sick with the plague of doubt and suspicion to the point that no nation or individual is outside its pale.

True to the spirit of its fundamental teachings, Buddhism does uphold the standpoint that the human mind is in a state of ill-health. However, this pathological nature of mind does not doom the mental patient ever to remain a physical wreck. Buddhism holds out to him not only ready hope and promise but also an effective approach to the achievement of a sense of optimism. In principle,

man's worries, anxieties, hallucinations, in sum his mass of suffering stem from his non-knowledge of facts of life, ignorance of himself and society. The moment he is encouraged to think loud and see for himself the true nature of himself and his socio-physical environment he is bound to emerge triumphant transcending all mental fetters that make him sick.

Man is too selfish and this nature of his is rooted in his belief in an enduring and permanent entity called a soul or an ego, (*sakkaya ditthi*). According to Buddhism there is no such thing called a soul or an ego but a flow of a stream of life conditioned by the elements of conditioning; form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. When these five groups of aggregates are held together, there comes into existence a conventional being. It can be likened to a process of striking a new chemical out of a combination of a certain group of chemicals mixed together in an experiment. Just as a clever analyst through his scientific knowledge would know severally the combination of chemicals even so should the mental patient or neurotic (namely the worldling) be encouraged to look at the stream of life in its true perspective. The moment one grasps the real nature of mind and body one would begin to realise that life is but a phantom or a mere fantasy. We involve ourselves too much in pleasure-hunting because we have but a perverted view of life. We are a mere bundle of ill-will, jealousy, hypocrisy, malice and ingratitude in the hunt for self-gratification. Non-knowledge of our mind and body with its fleeting nature is the real cause of many different kinds of mental disorders. True insight into the phenomenon of total personality could lift man from the state of neurosis and place him before the full glare of hidden realities. Many forms of man's mental disorders are bound to disappear with understanding. The Buddhist goal of realization of freedom rests on the full comprehension of reality.

In order to achieve this difficult goal, the system of Buddhist psychotherapy recommends purposeful introspection or looking into the inner-self of man, through the medium of meditation. We cannot see properly because we are not mindful. Where there is no mindfulness, there is no attention. Where there is no attention, namely bare attention (*sati*) there is no proper seeing. When we do not see properly, we take that which is not essential as essential, that which is essential as not essential. In the pursuit, we get entangled in a tangle of wrong views and as a result we begin to suffer from a variety of mental disorders. (*Brahmajala sutta – D.I*).

The mind that harbours ill-will, sensual gratification, jealousy, revenge, frustration stemming from matters pertaining to sexual relations with one's wife or husband

and many instances of similar emotional disturbances needs more than anything else a way to break away from that trend of thoughts. Turning attention away from what gives pain to the mind and the heart is generally known as diversion in modern psychotherapy. This mechanism of taking mind away from the source of pain is not new to Buddhist psychotherapy. In fact the basic principle of meditation is not only to cause the mind to withdraw from the source of pain itself but also gradually to train oneself to look at the mind more objectively in a spirit of detachment. Buddhist psychotherapy recommends the adoption of one of the following five ways or all to divert mind from the source of pain.

1. Reflection on a different subject or a matter.
2. Reflection on the disadvantages of the sources of pain.
3. Shutting the eyes and looking away from the source of pain.
4. Changing the positions (walking-sitting, running-walking etc.) and reflecting on them.
5. Forceful suppression of the source of pain

(W.P.21)

However, all forms of diversions cannot be described as profitable ways of taking the mind off the source of trouble. For example, taking many different kinds of intoxicating drugs, as is the case with many people in modern society, cannot be considered as an effective method of diverting the mind away from the source of pain. On the contrary, drug addiction will be another source of unpleasant experience and cause untold miseries to the victim. Even the kind of medicine the doctors very often prescribe for the purpose of tranquilizing mind and body of those patients who suffer from severe tension cannot be reckoned as effective permanent remedies. As soon as the effect of the medicine is no more the patient gets back to the same mental groove he used to be in. Buddhist psychological techniques of mind-culture not only prove themselves more effective in overcoming tensions of many different kinds but also would stand out as more promising simply because they are of lasting therapeutic value. (See. M. 62).

Diversion of mind from the source of pain should, from a Buddhist psychological point of view be effected with *understanding* born of *mindfulness*. If the five techniques recommended above are applied one after the other until one is

successful in taking the mind away from the source of pain, the relief one is bound to get is more permanent than what one could get from the use of drugs or medicine.

Buddhist psychology postulates that we make mistakes, get into difficulties, cultivate unwholesome thoughts towards others, hate others, feel jealous about others, envy others' wellbeing and act and react with ill-will towards others because we are selfish and also we do not understand that we are selfish. It is that selfishness that makes us tense. The selfish mind is not contented, not tolerant and not capable of understanding the cause and source of tension, anxiety and dissatisfaction. As long as the mind is disturbed and agitated so long it cannot come into grips with the problem. To understand the problem, here in this case the problem of tension, one has to calm down his mind and then make it stand still at one point. The therapeutic value of meditation in this regard is tremendous. It is not of limited value like either drugs or medicine but assures lasting effect.

In regard to the practice of meditation the question most often asked is how a person could act differently when faced with a situation that is most provocative. In fact, the attitude of 'tit for tat' or 'eye for eye' or in other words to answer anger with anger and cruelty with cruelty is the common philosophy of every one of us. If we continue to act and react in a frame of mind based on the philosophy of 'tooth for tooth' and 'eye for eye' are we any different from animals? Aldous Huxley's analysis of man is that man is different from animals because man is a thinking animal. In modern parlance, man is many more times different from a robot though it can perform many complex duties and responsibilities because it acts and reacts within certain limitations beyond which it cannot go. In other words, it possesses no power of independent thinking. It carries out what is dictated but in a mechanical way. Man is many times different from both animals and robots, because of his ability to think, to understand and to decide on matters of great complexity. If it is so, should man go with the stream or against the stream? Buddhist psychotherapy is a science by itself that motivates the subject to go against the stream.

To induce tranquility in the tension-ridden mind, Buddhist psychology recommends 40 effective meditation exercises. These exercises are devised in such a way so that they suit the varying temperaments of different individuals. Of the 40 meditation exercise, one that can be practised by all irrespective of differences in individual temperaments is that which is commonly known as exercise on in-and-out-breathing (D.22).

The specific aim of this exercise is to induce tranquility of mind through fixing attention on the process of in-and-out-breathing. It encourages one to practise breathing in and breathing out in a rhythmical pattern. Two rhythmic patterns are recommended to reduce the level of tension. While the exercise is being practised, the meditator is advised to have 'choiceless awareness' of what takes place in his inner-self. Awareness born of undivided attention causes not only a reduction of tension but it also makes the mind experience a wonderful feeling of relief.

This is how one is advised to try this exercise. For a beginner, it is better to choose a place where there is no disturbance. Seated crossed-legged or in any manner one is used to, but without leaning against a support, one should if he so desires close his eyes. Then while taking a long breath, he should be mindful that he is taking a long breath. When he breathes it out, he should be mindful that he is breathing out a long breath. Similarly when he does practise it in the next step with a short breath he should be mindful of what he does. If he does practise the exercise daily between 15 to 30 minutes each time, he will begin to realize that he could do this meditation exercise even in the midst of people amidst disturbances. Moreover, he will feel that he has a certain degree of control over his senses. Control over senses is the secret of success in overcoming tension.

Each meditation exercise has its immediate goal. *Maharahulovada Sutta* recommends seven meditation exercises of much therapeutic value for combating the root causes of tension. The exercises and their specific goals are as follows:

1. Practise meditation on Loving Kindness (*metta*) to overcome ill-will.
2. Practise meditation on Compassion (*karuna*) to overcome cruelty.
3. Practise meditation on altruistic joy (*mudita*) to overcome jealousy.
4. Practise meditation on equanimity (*upekkha*) to overcome hatred.
5. Practise meditation on repulsiveness (*asubha*) to overcome lust.
6. Practise meditation on the perception of impermanence (*anicca sanna*) to overcome pride of self or "I" (*asmi-mana*).
7. Practise meditation on in-and-out-breathing (*anapana-sati*) in order to get help towards keeping down tension.

In sum, Buddhist psychotherapy presumes that there is a problem; most mental disorders are caused due to tension. It also postulates three major causes of tension stemming from the root of pride in a Self or 'I'. Three main causes of tension are rooted in sense-desire, ill-will and delusion. The remedy for most mental disorders from a Buddhist psychological standpoint lies in inducing tranquility of mind through a graded course of meditation.

*REFERENCES:*

Stafford Clark, David (1971) *Psychiatry Today*, Penguin Books, London.

Rev. Richard Morris (1888) *The Anguttara Nikaya Part II*, P.T.S. London

Hare, E.M. (1947) *Woven Cadences of Early Buddhism*, London.

Anderson, Dines (1948) *Sutta Nipata*, P.T.S. London.

Radhakrishnan, S. (1958) *The Dhammapada*, Oxford University Press, London.

Buddhadatta, P, Thero (1956) *The Dhammapadatthakatha*, M.D. Gunasena, Colombo.

Soma Thera (1960) *Removal of Distracting Thoughts*: W.P. No. 21, B.P.S. Kandy, Sri Lanka.

*Mahasatipatthana Sutta, Digha Nikaya: Sutta No. 22 Vol. II*, 290-315.

Hirai, Tomio. (1975) *Zen Meditation Therapy*, Tokyo, Japan.

*Maharahulovada Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No. 62, Vol. I*, 420-6.

Piyadassi Thero. (1978) *Buddhist Meditation*, B.P.S. Kandy, Sri Lanka.

