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"Selflessness" in the service of the ego: Contributions, limitations and dangers of Buddhist psychology for western psychotherapy
Max Michalon. American Journal of Psychotherapy. New York:2001. Vol. 55, Iss. 2, p. 202-218 (17 pp.)

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Buddhist psychology has now gained some credence in the West and is starting to exert a growing influence both on various areas of medicine and well-established Western psychotherapies. We reviewed key texts of both the Eastern and Western Buddhist literature, with particular emphasis on recent well-established Western authors.

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[Headnote]

Buddhist psychology has now gained some credence in the West and is starting to exert a growing influence both on various areas of medicine and well-established Western psychotherapies. We reviewed key texts of both the Eastern and Western Buddhist literature, with particular emphasis on recent well-established Western authors.
The Buddhist concept of "selflessness" is often perceived by Westerners as a recommendation for the dissolution of their ego and its propelling forces in their competitive societies, instead of an invitation to dispel the artificial compactness of their "I."
With the notions of "Self" and "No self" placed at the interface of Buddhist psychology and Western psychotherapies, this article: (i) attempts a description of the pros and cons of the two approaches and (ii) points at a probably greater therapeutic potential when the two work hand in

hand rather than as antagonists. Some of the limitations resulting from such a joint approach will also be highlighted.

[Headnote]

Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering, in order that they may have existence.

I have meditated often and much upon suffering. I have come to the conclusion that only suffering, here below, is supernatural. The rest is human...

Leon Bloy (1, p.349)

William James, one of the great psychologists of Harvard, had already in the early 1900s noticed the great "psychological sophistication" of Buddhism. Indeed, as reported by Epstein (2), James, while lecturing at Harvard, "suddenly stopped when he recognized a visiting Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka in his audience, 'Take my chair ... You are better equipped to lecture on psychology than I. This is the psychology that everybody will be studying twenty-five years from now.'"

In the context of the domination of psychoanalysis during almost half a century, more than twenty-five years were necessary for Buddhism to gain any measure of recognition in contemporary psychology. Ultimately, however, James' prediction did have some truth in it, since after more than 25 centuries of existence, Buddha's message is beginning to appeal to Western therapeutic communities and has already infiltrated many areas of medicine, palliative care, psychology, and psychiatry.

Freud's skepticism and misunderstanding of Buddhism did not prevent key figures such as Karen Homey, William James, Otto Rank, Gerhard Adler, and Erich Fromm from being impressed with the psychological potential of Buddhism and its therapeutic promise for the West (2,3). Among the psychoanalytic pioneers, Carl Jung was probably the one in closest contact with various Eastern philosophies. Early in his career, he gave a series of seminars on "The Western Parallels" (1930), "The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga" (1932) (4); he also published several essays on Eastern subjects, "Yoga and the West" and "The Psychology of Eastern meditation" (1948) (5). In his psychological commentary on the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" or Bardo Thodol, Jung went as far as to state that this "work has been my constant companion, and to it I owe not only many stimulating ideas and discoveries, but also many fundamental insights" (6).

For a long time Buddhist psychology and meditation were "misunderstood in the West, often thought of as a religion based on retreat from the outer world and silent meditation" (7), or as a manner of learning deep relaxation with transcendental connotations. Many Westerners still believe that Buddhism as such is a culture-bound group of esoteric religions without much to offer members of different faiths. This is far from the truth since Buddha himself never claimed that he was a prophet or a god: on the contrary, he strongly rejected any "blind faith" in his teaching and suggested that his followers maintain a "healthy doubt" about his sayings until they had experimented and assimilated his teaching for themselves.

The strong ethical and compassionate content of Buddha's message may explain its gradual merger with various preexisting Eastern religions (essentially with Bon in Tibet, Taoism in China, and Shinto in Japan), with the consequence that over many centuries its psychological substance remained somewhat inaccessible to the West.

Buddha's philosophy is highly psychological and cognitive in nature: he said himself, "I do not teach theory, I analyze..." Like psychoanalytically oriented therapies, Buddhist psychological approaches are heterogeneous, with various schools of thought and philosophies. But at their center the very message of Buddha remains unchanged.

In view of the already significant spread of Buddhist meditation and psychotherapeutic approaches in the West, it may be worthwhile to consider their potential benefits and dangers to Westerners.

BASIC CONCEPTS OF BUDDHA'S TEACHING

Despite its intricate complexity, the core of the Buddhist Dharma (or natural law, truth, "the way things are in and of themselves" [81]) can be summarized in- the "Four Noble Truths" as they were expressed in Buddha's first sermon delivered at Sarnath, soon after the night of his "enlightenment." Of note is the fact that these central concepts remain probably the most misunderstood.

1. The first Noble Truth: Life is difficult. This is also known as the truth of dukkha. Translated in the West as "suffering," the literal meanings of dukkha are: "hard to bear," "dissatisfactory," "off the mark," "frustrating" and "hollow." In *Awakening the Buddha Within* (9), Lama Surya Das writes, "[Dukkha], the so-called 'bad news' of Buddhism, has led some people to misconstrue Buddhism as pessimistic and life-denying. Yet Buddha's primary message, 'the good news' of Dharma, is that there is a way to be free of suffering ... Buddha does not teach that everything is suffering. What Buddhism does say is that life, by its nature, is difficult, flawed, and imperfect."

2. The second Noble Truth: Life is difficult because of attachment, because we crave satisfaction in ways that are inherently dissatisfying. Craving here:

suggests a state of incessant, never-ending thirst that won't quit... It is our attachment and our identification with what we crave that causes suffering.... It is not the outer objects that entangle us. It is the inner clinging that entangles us.... People who misinterpret Buddha's teachings often worry that if they rid themselves of craving, they will no longer be able to love or live with passion. Quite the opposite is true. We will still have our healthy desires, but now they won't be contaminated and misdirected by insatiable craving. (9, p. 83)

3. The third Noble Truth is that nirvana (liberation, the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice) (8) exists for everyone. Nirvana etymologically means extinction of thirst and annihilation of suffering.

Many people are terrified by this concept because they associate craving with passion No passion equals no life! This is a nihilistic or extreme version of what freedom from craving means. The mind that is free of craving is much more abundant and fruitful than such superficial notions might suggest. (9, p. 85)

4. The fourth Noble Truth: "The way to realize this liberation and enlightenment is by leading a compassionate life of virtue, wisdom, and

meditation. These three spiritual trainings comprise the teaching of the Eight-Fold path to enlightenment" (9). There are eight factors in this path which are traditionally described as belonging to three groups: (i) "Wisdom: right view and right thought. (ii) Morality: right speech, right action and right livelihood. (iii) Concentration: right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration" (10).

The Four Noble Truths are also referred to as the "Middle Way" because they are free from all extremes (6). We recommend for further reading references (9, 11).

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF MEDITATION

The various forms of Buddhist meditation, like the many forms of psychotherapy, are not monolithic or dogmatic in content. All forms of Buddhist meditation share some fundamental common principles. For readers not familiar with these approaches, I would like to introduce some of the basic principles of "Insight (Vipassana) meditation," as taught by the Theravadin school, ("The teaching of the elders," the only one of the earlier schools of Buddhism to have survived to the present and currently the dominant form of Buddhism in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Burma [8, 12]).

For Vipassana meditation to be fully successful, its two essential components, concentration (samatha) and mindfulness (a mental eye or a "sixth sense"), should both be given full attention and ideally be practiced hand in hand. Concentration, the ability of the mind to sustain an unwavering attention on a single object of observation (onepointedness concentration), usually "watching the breath," is coupled in this approach with moment-to-moment awareness of the changing of "objects of perception."

Concentration, when deep, is the basis for something akin to a "hypometabolic psychophysiological state termed the 'relaxation response' and may lead directly to what Freud described as the 'oceanic feeling'" (13). For others, it may lead to a hypnotic induction. The deeper the concentration phase, the greater the potential for mindfulness.

During the mindfulness phase, the meditator studies his/her flow of thoughts as they come to mind without any attempt at controlling them. Although deep concentration is a cornerstone of meditation (many Westerners do not go beyond this phase), mindfulness appears to be a more essential phase in "insight" meditation. With mindfulness, the meditator develops a gradual sense of the changing of "objects of perception" and looks deeper into the interconnectedness of a wide range of experiences. He/she gradually becomes acquainted with the notion of "impermanence" (annica), so central in Buddhism. Moment-to-moment observation, with nonjudgmental "bare attention" to "thoughts, feelings, images or sensations as they arise and pass away ... precipitates psychological insights into the nature of the self" (13). As I will discuss further, to some extent mindfulness is akin to free association or "self analysis."

Of note is the fact that in Zen meditation, mindfulness as such is discouraged, since the focus of attention is on "one's breath or on a syllable or phrase ... or a koan. All external and internal distractions are ignored" (14). Nevertheless, in advanced stages of Zen meditation - as in Vipassana meditation - "significant changes take place in the quality of concentration and in the nature of one's awareness or consciousness" (14).

WESTERNERS AND THE NOTION OF ANATTA OR "NO SELF"

The ego's misconceptions about reality... keeps us in bondage, whether it be the iron bondage of worldly existence or the golden bondage of a spiritual way of life. The iron bondage is our continual mental and physical suffering in the cycle of dissatisfied existence known as samsara, while the golden bondage is that of being enslaved to misconceptions and false philosophies... The highest goal is to be free of all bondage.

Lama Thubten Yeshe

Dr. N. Coltart, a writer and accomplished psychoanalyst, found that of the three pillars of Buddhism: dukkha, anicca, and anatta, the latter notion of "no self" was one of the most difficult to penetrate. "[Westerners] are all so ego-bound. The whole of psychoanalysis is bound up with the concept of the ego. The whole idea of being a 'no self takes the Western mind ages to penetrate and to be realized." In Dr. Coltart's own experience, in spite of having been trained in Buddhism by a Theravadin teacher subsequently recognized as one of the "best teachers in the West," it took her twelve years of "very regular [Buddhist] practice and listening to teaching to realize anatta and have it real for me" (15).

It is precisely because this notion of "no self," emptiness, nothingness or void, - so central to all forms of Buddhism - is so foreign to Westerners, that it may pose some risks when either ill understood or ill taught. To quote Professor M. Miyuki, a Jungian analyst and Buddhist formally educated both in Japan and in the West,

It can be dangerous for Westerners to do meditation The ego structure is different in the East and in the West When you meditate, and this is also, in part, Jung's interpretation, you take all the ego energy and are drawn to some inner place which then stimulates the unconscious If the individual ego is the only form of reality you have experienced prior to that, you could be psychologically disturbed . . . , you really could go crazy. (16, p. 103)

SELF AND "NO SELF" IN WESTERN AND BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

Traditionally, one of the most conspicuous differences between Western and Buddhist psychologies has been their divergent treatment of the concept of self or ego. In the West, the self is perceived as an enduring entity, as established for example by Descartes, "cogito ergo sum/I think therefore I am," or by Freud, "where id was there ego shall be." A strong ego is affirmed as a key to success in work, interpersonal relationships and life in general. In such a context, the ego is strengthened in therapy and low self-esteem is corrected.

For many Buddhists, the existence of a conventional "I," which we all have, is accepted on a relative, "mundane" level of reality, but ultimately, the self is affirmed as a nonenduring entity, a result of ephemeral mental and physical aggregates. This false representation of "I" is constructed, whenever possible, through the avoidance of nonpleasurable feelings, situations, and stimuli. This illusory "I" nourishes itself through pleasant sensations, "positive states," in an avid search to attach itself to a hypothetical general happiness. For Buddhists, the self is perceived as a false belief, an illusion leading to the creation of a sense of false continuity that resists the inevitable impermanence (anicca) that comes with life. The self in such a context is relocated at its real place, at the center of our "suffering." This notion of the illusory ego - though traditionally Buddhist - was more recently reformulated by Jacques Lacan, who suggested, to the surprise of some analysts, that it is

precisely a strong ego, or rather the illusion of a strong ego, that people are suffering from.

Buddhism begins with the proposition that if one is not a self, if the ego is a construct leading to dukkha/suffering, this faulty perception should be "deconstructed" and replaced instead with the notion of "no self" (anatta). With the combination described above of deep concentration and mindfulness, in Buddha's own term, Bhavana (development through mental training), as the meditator's concentration intensifies, he/she starts to see deeply into the interconnectedness of a wide range of life experiences. The sense of a compact "I" starts to dissipate. As reported by Rubin (17), Jack Engler, a Harvard psychologist who spent several years in India and Burma studying Buddhist Vipassana meditation, describes as follows the series of transformations that occur during the meditative (Theravadin) process of "deconstruction and reorganization" of one's inner ego world:

The normal sense that I am a fixed, continuous point of observation from which I regard now this object, now that, is dispelled My sense of being a separate observer or experiencer behind observation or experience is revealed to be the result of a perceptual illusion No enduring or substantial entity or observer or experiencer or agent - no self - can be found behind apart from these moment-to-moment events to which they could be attributed (anatta = "no self"). (p. 203)

Later, with further insight, the meditator:

discovers how an object appears not in itself ... but always relative to (his/her) state of observation. . . , that there are actually no enduring entities or schemas at all; only momentary constructions are taking place.... Consciousness literally breaks up into a series of discrete events which are discontinuous in space and time.... Representation and reality construction are therefore discovered to be discontinuous processes.... When this total moment-to-moment "coming to be and passing away" is experienced, there is a profound understanding of the radical impermanence (anicca) of all events... I become aware of the selflessness (anatta) of mind, body, external objects and internal representations (pp. 203-204)

After the "mourning of the ego as a loss object"-usually a single loss object in psychoanalysis - the meditator discovers that he/she has actually lost all his/her objects, the "object world as such." From this mourning phase burgeons an inner world reorganization: In meditation there is thoroughgoing object loss There is a renunciation of self-object ties altogether There is no new identification and no more object seeking In meditation all objects ties are finally "outgrown" (p. 204).

SELF AND "NO SELF" AS SEPARATE ENTITIES OR PART OF THE SAME CONTINUUM?

Western psychologists and psychiatrists who also have Buddhist training comment that in their day-to-day practice they do have to "switch hats" when they are in different professional contexts. On the one hand, when helping patients with psychotic or major character disorders: "They work hard to help [patients to] develop a sense of self: a sense of ongoingness in existence - a sense of stability, predictability and personal continuity across time, place and states of consciousness" (18, p. 111). On the other hand, when they go to the meditation center to teach Vipassana or "insight" meditation for example, they do just the opposite from their clinical practice: "[They] help students come to the realization that this enduring "self," which, from another point of view, [they] are helping patients to develop, does not exist" (18, p.112).

Are we dealing with diametrically opposed entities that cannot be reconciled or are there ways to merge the self and "no self" approaches into a whole, taking into consideration universal phases of development? For Jack Engler (18) the two approaches can be recognized as stages in the development of the self:

The two approaches can be integrated by recognizing that there are stages in the development of the self, or, more accurately, in the images or representations of self. It seems that our Western traditions have mapped out the early stages of that development and that the Buddhist traditions have mapped out the later or more advanced stages in which "decentering" from the egocentrism of early development culminates in self altruism. And neither tradition knows much about the other. They are talking about the same continuum of development, but about different segments of it. (p. 112)

When the stages of development in ego structures are taken into consideration, the implications for therapists with either a solely Buddhist approach or a dual psychoanalytically oriented and Buddhist approach are significant in terms of potential difficulties for their clients. As an example, in the first third of their lives most individuals establish their selves and ego strengths through social competition, and "attaching themselves to the external environment: getting through their education, developing a profession, marrying and having a family" (16). Opposing the establishment of the self in this context could be potentially detrimental. Moreover, should someone with a chronic psychotic illness be taught that his/her already ill-established sense of self-continuity and borders with the external world should be abolished and transformed into selflessness?

Self-negation can also be potentially crippling for people traditionally oppressed in their society. Such individuals may become even more alienated when they lose their self-centeredness. "Self-disavowal can be particularly disastrous for people who have traditionally been marginalized in Western society, such as women and racial or religious minorities. Such people have often been crushed or invalidated on a sociocultural as well as a personal level" (17).

Conversely, an individual mature in his/her sense of self, in a mid-age crisis "more centered on the discovery of the unsatisfactory nature of human life, the discovery of human mortality. . . , the deep question of the meaning of life" (16), can, with a Buddhist approach, derive tremendous insight into the nature of his/her non-enduring self, his/her interconnectedness with the rest of the world and the reason for his/her existential suffering.

In conclusion, as suggested by Engler (18),

in developmental terms, you have to be somebody before you can be nobody. The farther reaches of meditation practice require a strong ego in the psychoanalytic sense of the capacity to assimilate, organize, and integrate experience; and a relatively well-integrated sense of self. (p. 117)

THE EGO AND THE SELF AS VIEWED BY JUNG AND TIBETAN BUDDHISM

For Jung, ego and self are not synonymous. The self is viewed as the total of the psyche of a given individual and as such includes the ego; "the ego, full of distortions and projections, needs to be dissolved before the self can emerge, . . . in the process of individuation one does not destroy the ego, rather one places it in subordinate relation to the self" (6, p.83).

Some parallels can be drawn between the perception of the ego in Tibetan Buddhism and Jung's conceptions of the ego and self. Indeed, for Tibetan Buddhists, what should be dissolved is the ego as a concrete entity and consequently a construct of a permanent "I," which represents a barrier to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the existence of a conventional "I," which we all have, is accepted: "[it] exists on a relative level of reality, while on the ultimate, absolute level of reality it does not exist" (6).

Jung also suggests that for true transformation in psychotherapy, "the disappearance of egohood is the only criterion of change." But he maintains that frequently "for Westerners a conscious ego and a cultivated understanding must first be produced through analysis before one can even think about abolishing egohood"(6).

LOW SELF-ESTEEM AND THE WEST

A paradoxical situation in the West is the contrast between, on the one hand, the projected need for a strong ego as a prerequisite for success and, on the other hand, the wide prevalence among many of "low self-esteem." This impoverished self-concept has now reached "epidemic" proportions in Western societies, according to Kabat-Zinn (19). The causes of low self-esteem in such a context can be manifold. It is tempting to hypothesize first an inability for many of those affected to attain their constantly escalating "ego ideal" in their environment of affluence. Epstein (2) suggests many possible alternatives:

The emphasis on individuality and autonomy, the breakdown of the extended and even nuclear family, the scarcity of "good enough" parenting, and the relentless drive for achievement versus affection ... leave a person all too often feeling cut off, isolated, alienated, empty, and longing for an intimacy. (p. 177) As reported by Kabat-Zinn (19), at a crosscultural meeting in 1990, the

Dalai Lama

did a double take when a Western psychologist spoke of low self-esteem. The phrase had to be translated several times for him into Tibetan, although his English is quite good. He just couldn't grasp the notion of low self-esteem, and when he finally understood what was being said he was visibly saddened to hear that so many people in America carry deep feelings of self-loathing and inadequacy. (p. 163)

In Tibet, said Sogyal Rinpoche, "a positive self is assumed ... If a person cannot maintain this positive feeling about himself . . . , he or she is considered a fool" (2). This situation is probably true of Eastern countries in general. Consequently, a significant limitation for many Buddhist teachers raised in the East is the inability to understand this state of mind among their Western students. They neither understand "the compelling fantasies of reparation that are often attached [to them...]," nor do they deal with these fantasies "in any kind of thorough psychoanalytic fashion" (2). This should be a significant concern for Western students intending to commence meditation with masters unprepared for basic Western psychopathologies.

THE SELF AT THE INTERFACE OF WESTERN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND BUDDHIST PSYCHOLOGY

PRACTICAL APPROACHES

As already stated, psychotherapy and meditation are both very attentive to the nature of the self. The belief in a unique personal identity, "the very mother of illusions" according to Harry Stack Sullivan (cited in 2), is too strongly held in the West by a great number of psychotherapists and patients. Preoccupations with daily suffering emanating from a wounded self may represent common reasons for people to enter psychotherapy, meditation or both. The complementarity of the two approaches, when practiced by correctly trained therapists, is gaining greater acceptance in view of their focus on different needs and timing in therapy.

In contrast with Buddhist psychology, Western psychotherapies are expert at addressing intrapsychic conflicts. Unfortunately, a significant number of patients in spite of their obvious improvement at the end of therapy, are left at the level of what Freud had himself termed "the return to a state of common unhappiness" (2). These patients complain that they did not actually find a satisfactory answer to their deep existential quest.

Buddhist psychology and deep meditation are more generic in their approach and may address more specifically the cause of our suffering as part of the impermanent nature of our self and its fictional aspects. Also better addressed are the very questions of: who am I, who are we, and what is our true nature?

EMPTINESS, FEAR AND PANIC, PSYCHOTIC EPISODES

In the early stages of their practice, Western beginners of meditation are frequently confronted with a sense of inner agitation or a worsening of their emotional symptoms. Different explanations have been advanced for this phenomenon. Most commonly it may be secondary to their first encounter with the notion of "void or emptiness." In such a context, emptiness should not be perceived as a "vacuity of feelings," but rather as a potential "key that unlocks the problems of the emotions" (2). The meditator may only be starting to realize his or her "absence of self-sufficiency or substantiality in person, or emotions [... or his/her absence of] qualities of independence and individual identity" (2). Experienced therapists recommend, with proper support on their part, to continue meditation or even to intensify it under proper guidance.

Alternative possibilities for this inner restlessness may be more serious in nature, and necessitate an interruption of meditation in the case of a patient moving into a state of deep terror or psychosis. With regard to an always-possible state of terror or panic, I would like to share with the reader the story of one of my patients.

Vignette 1

Jane (not her real name) sought therapy soon after she began her first few meditation practices. She was in her mid-thirties and had already consulted several psychologists and psychiatrists for chronic depression. She reported an extensive history of sexual abuse, which started at a

very early age with repeated abuse by a significant number of adult individuals, most of them casual friends of her mother at the time. Jane was surprised after her first few sessions of deep concentration (in the absence of "insight mindfulness") to experience a significant degree of sexual arousal at times presented as almost unbearable. Nevertheless she pursued her meditation for a few more sessions and was quickly confronted with the abreaction of intense recollections of various sexual scenes. Up to that time, they were unknown to her and she believed that they took place between the ages of 5 and 10 years. Her sense of panic and terror was so intense that she stopped all form of meditation and was urgently referred to me. Needless to say that in such a context, I substituted for her meditation approaches a dual treatment with psychotropic medications and psychotherapy. After she improved she did not consider resuming her meditation practice.

Jane's case reminds us of the power of forces previously repressed, which can at times be unleashed by psychotherapy, as well as meditation, and may overwhelm the ego. This brings us to the more dramatic risk for meditators of developing a state of psychosis, usually early in their practice, but at times even for experienced meditators within some forms of Tibetan Buddhism, especially its Tantric tradition (esoteric teachings that lead quickly to enlightenment, such as in Vajrayana [61]). Jung, the father of the "archetypes," repeatedly warned us of releasing unconscious contents without prudence and proper precautions: "The archetypes have this in common with the atomic world, which is ... that the more deeply the investigator penetrates into the universe of microphysics the more devastating are the explosive forces he finds enchained there" (6). Odajnyk (14), a Zen meditator and Jungian analyst, brings to our attention similar parallels with meditation. "Many people give up the practice of meditation . . . when they come face to face with the elemental forces of the psyche For those for whom the threat of psychosis is real . . . , psychotherapy should step in and deal with the problems that surface" (p. 136).

Tantric masters issue comparable forewarnings, "that the methods they teach are profound but also extremely powerful and therefore hazardous unless the proper preparations are made and the disciple is led into the practice gradually under the guidance of a qualified teacher"(6). For this reason, "Tibetan Buddhism, especially in its Tantric form, has traditionally observed a measure of secrecy" (6).

PARALLEL BETWEEN SELF-ANALYSIS AND INSIGHT MEDITATION

Opposing the most common psychoanalytic views of her time, Karen Homey published in 1942 her groundbreaking book on self-analysis (20). Of interest also is the fact that in spite of Freud's theoretical disbelief in self-analysis (for him ". . . the ego was a weak agency tossed about among the claims of instinctual drives, of the outside world and of a forbidding consciousness"), he did actually analyze his own dreams.

For Homey (20), "self-analysis is an attempt to be patient and analyst at the same time," a situation which has some similarities with that of the meditator. She described three main tasks in this process: the patient should ". . . (i) express himself as completely and frankly as possible, (ii) become aware of his unconscious driving forces and their influence on his life, and (iii) develop the capacity to change those attitudes that are disturbing his relations with himself and the world around him" (p. 101).

In my opinion, there are some parallels between her first task (one's train of free associations) and mindfulness/suspended attention or the moment-to-moment concentration on the changing of object perceptions (observation of thoughts, sensations, feelings and images as they arise and expire). With regard to her second and third tasks, one may see some similarities to the idea that in Insight meditation, the ego takes itself as an object of observation with a gradual change of focus over time ". . . from the intrapsychic content to an exclusive focus on intrapsychic process with emphasis on thought insubstantiality . . ." (13). In doing so there is an attempt by the meditator - borrowing a psychoanalytic word - to make 49 interpretations" of the cause of his/her inability to attenuate his/her suffering. In spite of these similarities, meditation should not be perceived as an Eastern variant of psychoanalysis or self-analysis, since as emphasized by Epstein, in Buddhist meditation "there is an inexorable shift away from the unconscious content once sufficient attention skills are developed, whereas pursuit of free association leads to identification of unconscious conflicts and constellations . . ." (13).

THE SELF AND OTHER IN THE BUDDHIST THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP

Gereon Kopf (21) compared the "psychic interwovenness" between disciple and master in the meditation theory of Zen master Dogen Kigen, on the one hand, and the therapeutic relationship in Jung's theory, on the other hand. He emphasized the fact that as opposed to an "unconscious transference of the self onto the other [the therapist]" as proposed by Jung, Dogen believes that the "self-centered self merely mistakes the other's psychic state for its own, while de facto nothing is transferred from the one to the other." Although ultimately Dogen contends that it is possible for "the self to experience the psychic state of the other without losing its individuality," it may be hypothesized that actually this substitution of "psychic state" in given circumstances may be responsible for unusual disciple-master relationships as are more and more reported in the West.

We are perfectly aware of the always possible aberrant behavior of both therapists in the West and masters/gurus in the East, but of note is the fact that in the West, well-trained therapists are usually capable of identifying and addressing transference issues with their patients. On the other hand, Epstein (2), a well-established authority in the fields of both Buddhism and Western psychotherapies as already mentioned, admits that "meditation practitioners and their generally psychologically untrained teachers are unambiguously unable or unwilling to handle the transference material that will inevitably emerge."

As emphasized by Jeffrey Rubin (17),

In 1983, five of the six most esteemed Zen Buddhist masters in the United States, who presumably were selected by enlightened teachers abroad to teach, were involved in grossly self-centered and conspicuously unenlightened behavior, such as sexually exploiting nonconsenting students and illegally expropriating funds from the community. (p. 205)

Jack Kornfield, an esteemed American teacher of Theravadin Buddhism, also points to two of the limitations and inadequacies of meditation practice:

(i) unresolved personal, relational, and occupational issues that meditation practice does not alter in meditation students and teachers, and (ii) major upheavals and problems around power, sex, honesty, intoxicants etcetera in a majority of the twenty or more largest centers of Zen, Tibetan, and Vipassana practice in America centering on the teachers (both Asian and American) themselves (Cited in 17). (pp. 205-206)

Similar problems have also been reported in Canada in a recent book (22).

I do not necessarily want to point a finger at the East and its teachers of meditation, but paraphrasing Moacanin (6), I would like to suggest with her that "[guru and therapists should] never [be] regarded as ultimate authorities: the psyche or mind of the individual - the only instrument through which one experiences reality - is the sole authority." A strong reminder of Buddha's suggestion that no matter how strong the message might be and how convincing the leader is, ultimately the subject should only trust his/her own judgement based on his/her own practice and experience.

MY PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Neither in the Eastern or the Western meaning of the term, do I consider myself to be a Buddhist. My first encounter with Insight (Vipassana) meditation was only a few years ago, in my fifties, when I was in the middle of very dramatic circumstances in my life.

My only child, my deeply loved and very promising twenty-one-year-old son, suddenly died accidentally. In Canada, away from any extended family, my wife and I were abruptly confronted with very intense grief. In spite of my many years of teaching grief and bereavement issues to residents, I must confess that my "in vivo" intense sorrow was overwhelming and for me far beyond any theoretical knowledge. I first received some help from a psychologist friend and subsequently decided to give meditation a try after a psychiatrist colleague from Sri Lanka - Christian by faith - introduced me to some basic Buddhist principles. I became familiar with the technique of meditation under the guidance of a colleague psychiatrist and his wife, both qualified meditation instructors as well as conventional Western psychotherapists.

I chose to return to work rather quickly; on the one hand this was salutary but on the other hand, as a consultation-liaison psychiatrist, I was daily confronted in the hospital with "death and dying" as well as situations very similar to the one I experienced in the ICU at the time of my son's death. In such a context, meditation came as one of the most helpful approaches that I could imagine and through regular practice I gained a significant amount of insight about my "self." First, with a surprising celerity, I was truly able to grasp the fact that "Death is the ultimate lesson in acceptance" (23). I also integrated the notion that any long-term freedom from my suffering could only come from the acceptance of both my son's "impermanence" and my own: a rather difficult task for someone in the midst of grieving.

As a human being and a psychiatrist, the notion of "impermanence" in life was certainly not a new concept, but the novelty in this context was to move away from the traditional rationalization and denial that most of us use as a shield in daily living and learn to "tame" my own potential mortality in an almost visceral manner.

I abandoned my perfectionism in life - an illusory battle to convince myself of the perennial nature of my actions - and consequently changed the hierarchy of my previous values. I also gradually learned to adopt the "middle-way" approach and to analyze with more circumspection the dual aspects of most human situations. In retrospect this approach protected me from any extreme decisions during my grief and also remained with me on an ongoing basis as a better way to approach the many dilemmas of life.

For me, the advantage of meditation over other forms of therapy was to remain constantly vigilant - throughout the day - to the "deconstruction" of my old self-centered perspectives and self-cherishing attitudes in life. I also learned, with major difficulties, to identify and eliminate the narcissistic projections that I had invested in my son, his promising future, and the grandchildren that I would never have.

In my professional daily practice, the deeper concentration I developed through meditation, as well as my change in life focus, helped me to listen more attentively to patients under my care and to be more alert to some of their more profound needs that I had been unable to identify in the past. In my day-to-day practice, I do not make any attempts to introduce the patients under my care to meditation or Buddhist psychology. On the one hand, I do not consider myself qualified in this regard and when a patient expresses a desire to pursue this route, I refer them to well-established and competent teachers in this field. On the other hand, I must acknowledge that my own discovery of Buddhist psychology has drastically changed my approach to psychotherapy, in particular for patients facing the deep mid-life quest for meaning in their life and for patients approaching the end of their life through threatening illnesses or advanced age.

I am only a beginner in meditation; I hope that with the passage of time I will continue to gain inner cohesion, harmony and eventually "wholeness" as suggested by Jung.

CONCLUSION

My encounter with Buddhist meditation and psychology has brought me considerable insight into life and my own self while still remaining grounded in my preexisting cultural background and psychiatric education. I do not think that the Eastern and Western psychologies are opposite in content and that one should exclude the other in therapeutic practice. On the contrary, the two approaches are complementary and bring to the field of psychotherapy their own merits.

As a psychiatrist, I discovered the marvel left behind by Buddha more than 25 centuries ago. A psychological marvel with surprising analytical, cognitive and spiritual potential, too long obscured in the West by its religious content only. This article has developed only limited aspects of the content of Buddhist psychology and its complexity. Westerners with a propensity for a 'meditative mind' and willing to learn more about Buddhism and Eastern psychology should probably bear in mind two messages. The first one from Buddha himself: "be a light unto yourself, do not take my word for it, go see for yourself." The second message is from two propositions by Jung: (i) "the West has a wealth of its own symbols . . ., there is no need to seek others in the East" (6), (ii) "Westerners must draw on their own philosophical and spiritual traditions for inspiration"(2).

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