

Buddhist Psychology

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Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. The Buddha lived in the foot-hills of the Himalayan Mountains in Northern India from 563 to 483 B.C. The term Buddha is a title, not a proper name. It means "one who is awake," one who has attained full humanness (Fadiman & Frager, 2002). The Buddha never claimed to be more than a man whose realization, attainments, and achievements were the result of his purely human capabilities. The central attitude in Buddhist thought is that every individual possesses this Buddha-nature, the capacity for developing into a complete human being and becoming a Buddha (Padmal, 1990).

The Buddha's teachings and various commentaries on those teachings are delineated in what is called the Pali Canon, a collection of writings in the Pali language spanning the first century B.C. through the fifth century A.D. The earliest of these essays contains a highly systematized philosophical and psychological analyses of the Buddhist tradition (Thirakoul, 2000). At the heart of these teachings are the three major characteristics of existence: impermanence, lack of an imperishable self or soul, and dissatisfaction as an essential attribute of the world. Logically emerging from these characteristics are the basic principles of Buddhism – the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path (Pettifor, 1996). The practice of meditation in many different forms has been developed as the means for directly experiencing the principles and truths of Buddhism. These concepts then form the basis of a comprehensive psychology that contains a rich theoretical model and practical proscriptive approaches to mental health.

Impermanence. This Buddhist doctrine expresses the transitory nature of all things, the undeniable fact that all objects, concepts, indeed everything in the world, are ever-changing and impermanent. This implies that there cannot be such a thing as a final authority or permanent truth (Thirakoul, 2000).

Selflessness. The Buddhist notion of impermanence applies to our innermost self as well. As such, the concept of selflessness is that there is no immortal soul or eternal, unchanging self that exists in each individual. The individual is, instead, a collection of elements, all of which are impermanent and constantly changing. In other words, our personalities are composed of mortal, constantly changing processes and the *individual* is simply a construct formed by the temporary interaction of these and other processes. According to Buddhist thought, all things – people, trees, mountains, animals – cannot exist except in terms of interdependence or coexistence with everything else and, all things are composite and temporary collections of processes (Fadiman & Frager, 2002). This view of self as "flowing processes" is very similar to William James' (1902) notion of consciousness as a "stream" which flows in a processional manner instead of being composed of discrete elements.

Dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction or suffering is the third characteristic of existence. Suffering comes not from the world around us but from ourselves. "It [suffering] lies in the limited ego – the relative consciousness – of each individual" (Fadiman & Frager, 2002). It would be incorrect to interpret the principle of dissatisfaction to mean only that suffering is an inevitable part of existence. The Buddha taught that the source of suffering lies within the

individual and, more importantly, each individual has the power to do something about their dissatisfaction. As outlined later in this paper, Buddhist psychology is designed to help us transcend our limited sense of self and experience real satisfaction with ourselves and the world (Dali Lama & Cutler, 1998).

The Four Noble Truths. The Buddha sought a way to overcome the suffering he saw as an inescapable part of human life. “In what was probably the most important psychological discovery of all time, the Buddha realized the universality of suffering, its cause, its cure, and the way to attain such liberation” (Mosig, 1990). He formalized this discovery in the Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is characterized by suffering or dissatisfaction. When we recognize our own suffering, or dissatisfaction, the Buddha in us will look at it, discover what has brought it about, and prescribe a course of action that can transform it into peace, joy, and liberation (Hanh, 1998).
2. The cause of suffering is desire, or craving. Most people are caught up in attachment to the positive and pleasurable and aversion toward the negative and painful. Craving creates an unstable frame of mind in which the present is never completely satisfactory. If unsatisfied, we are driven to change the present. If satisfied, we fear change, which brings about a renewal of frustration and dissatisfaction.
3. Suffering can be ended by the elimination of craving. According to Buddhist thought, one can learn to accept the world as it is without experiencing dissatisfaction. Eliminating craving does not mean extinguishing all desires. However, if one’s happiness depends on the fulfillment of certain wants, or one is controlled by desires, then these will inevitably lead to suffering. Some healthy desires are necessary for survival – like those for food and sleep. Acceptance of the world refers to an even-minded attitude of enjoying fulfilled desires without lamenting the inevitable periods when desires are not fulfilled. We learn to accept that things are as they are and cannot be otherwise (Fadiman & Frager, 2002).
4. The way to eliminate craving and dissatisfaction is the Middle Path, also called the Eightfold Path. Most people seek either to maximize gratification or – the other extreme – self-mortification. The Buddhist ideal is moderation. The basic principle of the Eightfold Path is that certain ways of thinking and acting can reduce suffering in one’s self and others and promote a sense of joy and peace. Briefly, the Eightfold Path consists of:
 - Right Understanding: mastering the Buddhist doctrines
 - Right Intention: earnest and honest commitment to apply their implications
 - Right Speech: awareness of impact of one's speech
 - Right Action: awareness of impact of one's actions
 - Right Livelihood: engaging in jobs and tasks that support the doctrine
 - Right Effort: relentlessly and diligently working at it
 - Right Mindfulness: forms of meditative practice that bring greater awareness

- Right Concentration: forms of meditative practice that bring focus and discipline

The Eightfold path begins with Right Understanding that encompasses a broad range of Buddhist doctrines, the most important ones being impermanence and selflessness. An understanding of identity as essentially a flow of temporary psychic processes avoids any notion of a discrete, absolute, metaphysical self. This Buddhist doctrine of the non-existence of the self is important to understand because the illusion of a permanent self is the primary factor which keeps individuals in the cycle of suffering. It is the "self", the "I", who experiences desire and craving, the very causes of one's suffering. Craving for sensory gratification, craving for continued existence, craving for annihilation - these are the motivational forces for the unenlightened individual's behavior (de Silva, 1991).

A second condition for Right Understanding is mastery of the doctrine of dependent origination (Claxton, 1990). This doctrine rejects the notion that the world is a collection of "things" with their own independent identities and characters. Rather, either intellectually or existentially, nothing exists on its own, and hence can not be said to exist as an independent entity. A closely related doctrine to dependent origination is the doctrine of the nature of dichotomies: human beings tend to make sense of their experience by organizing the world into a series of opposites: hot or cold, good or bad, up or down (Claxton, 1990). By creating dichotomies, we again separate existence into independent and separate things rather than experiencing the world as a holistic and interdependent whole.

A third condition, the understanding of the Buddhist notions of perception, is also critical for possessing Right Understanding. Under Buddhist psychology, every perception is subject to distortion, either by one's desires, by one's cravings, by the illusions of ego, or by habitual conceptions which have become dogma (Vajiranana, 1962).

Buddhist psychology, then, suggests several interrelated concepts that explain human behavior:

- The motivation for behavior is craving, which ultimately leads to suffering;
- Perception and cognition are distorted, clouding one's experience of reality;
- The sense of self is an illusion to which human beings desperately cling, allowing for the experience of desire and craving;
- Consciousness is composed of false notions and concepts; physical and mental phenomena are seen by the unenlightened individual as existing intrinsically, when they in fact are not endowed with any such ontological status.

The individual on the path toward enlightenment must necessarily understand these notions of impermanence, non-existence of self, transitoriness, human susceptibility to perceptual distortion, and dependent origination in order to apply them in the next steps in the Eightfold Path: Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, and Right Effort.

Right Intention consists of realizing the concepts of selfless detachment, love, and nonviolence. Right Speech means avoiding lies, gossip, abusive language, useless chatter and cultivating thoughtful, truthful, gentle, and useful speech. Right Action means moral, honorable, and peaceful conduct free of stealing, killing, dishonesty, abusive sexual practices,

and drugs or alcohol. Right Livelihood is achieved by avoiding jobs that bring harm to anyone or anything and instead working to help people in an honorable way. Right Effort means consciously monitoring one's thought and shifting from negative cognitions to positive and life affirming ones (Hanh, 1998).

It is through the last two paths that an attempt is made not only to apply the understanding of the doctrines, but to actually experience them. Right Mindfulness means to be aware of and attentive to the body, emotions, and thoughts. Various types of meditation have been developed in different schools of Buddhism that promote these awarenesses (Fadiman & Frager, 2002). Right Concentration refers to the development of mental focus, also through meditative techniques, which help accomplish the other aspects of the path.

The Eightfold Path leads one towards the Buddhist concept of the ideal human being. The two main schools of Buddhist thought, the Theravada and Mahayana, contain different conceptions of the ideal human. These two ideals can be seen as complementary rather than contradictory (Fadiman & Frager, 2002). The Theravada ideal is the Arhat and focuses on self-discipline, where as the Mahayana ideal, the Bodhisattva, stresses service to others. Both are essential ingredients in the Buddhist conception of personality growth.

Buddhism fosters a sense of vital dialectic, the simultaneous appreciation of the real and the ideal and the recognition of the tension between the two. This dialectic approach manifests itself in virtually all aspects of Buddhist thought. The acceptance of this tension provides a way to cope with present limitations and to move toward the ideal.

To say flatly that something is true or false is to ignore the principle of impermanence. Adherents to Buddhism are encouraged to say, "It is so, and it is not so, and it is so," (Hanh, 1998). Practically every situation in life can be better understood by applying this dialectic (Fadiman & Frager, 2002).

Buddhist thinking has had a significant influence on different areas of psychology. Meditation may provide many of the benefits of psychotherapy. Carrington and Ephron (1975) and Engler (1986; 1993) have explored a number of ways in which psychoanalysis and meditation techniques can interact effectively. Erich Fromm (1970, as cited in Fadiman & Frager, 2002) believed that the goals of Buddhism and psychoanalysis are the same: they include insight into self, liberation from the tyranny of the unconscious, and knowledge of reality. Others have found meditation to be a valuable adjunct to therapy (Claxton, 1990; Kabat-Zinn, 1991, 1994; Kornfield, 1993).

Gestalt therapy and Buddhism also share basic principles. Both stress the importance of mindful living in the present. For both, awareness is a primary tool for change. Rather than the unconscious, Perls (1969, as cited in Fadiman & Frager, 2002) argued that the conscious mind is our enemy. Similarly, the Buddha taught that it is the conscious mind that clings to cravings and to the false idea of the separate self.

Personally, I find the concepts of allowing, compassion, and staying in the moment extremely important aspects of the Depth Oriented Depth Therapy and Redecision Therapy I do with clients. The more I can let go of my expectations and needs while holding my clients in a safety net of unconditional positive regard, the more they seem to be empowered to change themselves in the ways that suit them.

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