

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BUDDHISM

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'Everything arises from the mind.'
- *Buddha Shakyamuni.*

The great esotericist Manly Palmer Hall once wrote, 'In Buddhism we have what is probably the oldest and most perfectly integrated system of what we now call psychology.' I think Hall is right. Certainly, there were others before Buddha Shakyamuni whose teachings were psychological in nature, but I don't know of any other person *before* the Buddha who had expounded such a *clear, coherent, logical* and *empirically-based* set of psychological principles and techniques.

Yes, first and foremost, Buddhism is *applied psychology*, the aim of which, in the words of the Venerable Ajahn Chah, is to 'cure disease of the mind.' The Venerable Narada Maha Thera said something similar when he described Buddhism as 'a system of deliverance from the ills of life.' Alan Watts saw Buddhism as 'something more nearly resembling psychotherapy,' as opposed to its being a religion or philosophy 'as these [terms] are understood in the West.'

Specifically, the 'system' *treats* what Buddhism often calls an 'illusory [or a 'false'] mind' (that is, a mind characterized and dominated by wandering, oppositional and discriminatory thoughts) with a view to bringing into manifestation a 'true [or 'pure'] mind' (being a mind which is *not* in opposition to itself).

Buddhism has something distinctively unique and, I think, very meaningful to say about 'disease of the mind', and it is this — the root cause of our disorder, distress, sorrow, anxiety, stress, tension, insecurity, discontent, frustration, and general 'unsatisfactoriness' (*dukkha*) is ... *attachment, craving, grasping* and *clinging* of various kinds (collectively, *upādāna*) ... especially, *clinging* ... to 'mind stuff' in the form of, among other things, ideas, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, opinions and prejudices.

All of this 'mind stuff' we then turn back on *itself* ... and on *ourselves*. That is tantamount to *insanity* but we are all very good at doing it ... most of our waking hours (if not whilst asleep as well). Instead of living by reason and direct experience (*sanity*), we are driven by emotional compulsion. Worse, we cling to the 'self' *as* self, and we even manage to convince ourselves that we 'belong' to that self, and that we are those myriads of *I's* and *me's* that make up our waxing and waning consciousness.

Now, some dispute that Buddhism is a *religion*. I think it *is* a religion ... at least in *some* of its manifestations, but *not* others. Be that as it may, Buddhism, as Watts stated, is certainly *not* a religion as Westerners generally understand the term.

Nor is Buddhism a *philosophy* as we generally understand the term, although it does contain much which is philosophical, as well as ethical and moral, in nature. However, that which is philosophical in Buddhism is very much 'practical philosophy' ... with the emphasis on 'practical' or, rather, *practice*.

One thing Buddhism is *not*, is a 'belief-system.' There is *nothing* to believe in Buddhism. There are only certain things to do, experiment with, and experience.

Back to my theme. Buddhism is a form of 'therapy' ... *self illusion therapy* or *ego delusion therapy*, you could call it. The basic premise of Buddhism is this — all of our problems and difficulties in this life arise out of our mentality. More specifically, the *root* of all our problems and difficulties — all our *upādāna* — lies in our illusory sense of a separate selfhood, in our misplaced concept of *I-ness*, that is, in a *false view* of who we really are. To borrow a couple of phrases from the 'Big Book' of Alcoholics Anonymous, the result of our misbelief in a separate 'self' is 'self-will run riot', and the regular practice — note that word *practice* — of Buddhism is able to relieve us of the 'bondage of self.'

The essence of Buddhism, in two words, is ... 'Wake up!' Yes, Buddhism is ... an 'awakening.' Buddhism is a set of *humanistic* principles and teachings which, when put into regular practice, enable us to overcome ('cure') our *false view* of ourselves — which is due to *ignorance (avijjā)* — and thereby experience a *psychological transformation* or *mutation*. We then overcome what Manly Palmer Hall referred to as our '*psychological astigmatism*.' That is a condition in which we fail to see things as they really are because we are locked into certain habits of mind and modes of perception which are based on the supposed existence of a separate self.

That is why Buddhism has been described as a teaching of 'practising within.' Buddhism is a whole *mind-body experience*. Buddha Shakyamuni was a radical empiricist. He taught people how to realize for themselves enlightenment ... by direct experience.

It is through the regular practice of mindfulness, from one moment to the next, that we experience — note that word *experience* — life directly ... without those mental filters and psychological barriers which we tend to erect between ourselves and the objects of experience.

Buddha Shakyamuni was very smart. He knew that it was impossible to *directly* cultivate 'happiness.' That is why he spoke in terms of the causes of 'unhappiness'. Do you want to be happy? Of course. We all do. Then correct the causes of your *unhappiness*. That is how Buddhist psychology works. Although the Buddha was not a psychologist *per se*, he nevertheless 'discovered' and understood the unconscious mind (*bhavanga-citta*), the ego (*atta*), and ego fixation (*atta-vādupādāna*) ... some 2,500 years before Sigmund Freud!

That *is* amazing! Yes, if nothing else, Buddhism is an *education*. In that regard, the English word '*education*' is derived from the Latin roots *educō* and *educare*. *Educare* means 'to rear or to bring up,' and can be traced to the Latin root words *e* and *ducere*. Together, *e-ducere* means to 'pull out,' to 'draw out,' and to 'lead forth'

... all aptly applicable to Buddhism, for the teachings of Buddhism, if diligently practised, will indeed 'draw out' one's innate potential to become a buddha.

Buddhism is also a *praxis* ... and a *practice*. It consists of various practices and activities by means of which we can better come to understand ourselves, others and the world. However, those practices and activities have to be enacted, practiced and realized in our minds and bodies.

We learn in Buddhism that our mind is part of the 'problem,' but it can still be used to faithfully *report* on the flow of life from one moment to the next. That is why mindfulness is so important. We are *not* separate from life. We can *never* be less than life. We are persons among persons, each part of the endless procession of life. We are *not* those waxing and waning *I*'s and *me*'s, those various 'selves' which we mistakenly take for the *person* each of us really is.

It has been said that, for the first time, Buddha Shakyamuni taught that not only was self-deliverance possible, it could be attained independently of an external agency. He said, 'I have delivered you towards deliverance. The Dhamma, the Truth is to be self realized.' Further, he encouraged his followers to 'come and see,' that is, to investigate for themselves whether or not his teachings worked.

There is a saying in Zen along these lines: 'Using the mind to look for reality is *delusion*. Not using the mind to look for reality is *awareness*. Freeing oneself from the mind is total *liberation*.' We need to see the ego apart. We need to see the body, our thoughts, our feelings, and so on, as separate. How can we do that? Never ask *how*. Just do it. Observe. Watch. Be choicelessly aware. See those things coming and going ... and don't associate the so-called 'me' or 'I' of you with any of those things. This will break down the very foundation of your thinking.

Most of us engage in compulsive, and generally useless, thinking. We never stop thinking, and most of our thinking is of a totally useless and mindless kind. Indeed, we find that our minds take up all of our attention! We identify ourselves with our minds, and so find ourselves trapped in time, 'living' (if you can call it that) exclusively through memory, evaluation, interpretation, judgment, analysis, and anticipation ... anything but actually living *purposefully* and *consciously* from one moment to the next. Our minds have become so conditioned that they are very good at denying, and seeking to escape from, the present moment ... which is the *only* moment we have. Remember the immortal words of Omar Khayyám? 'Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life.' But how can we possibly be happy when we constantly allow our mind to run in its habitual ways?

Now, it really doesn't matter whether or not you're a Buddhist. The only thing that *really* matters is that you attain freedom from the bondage of self. *That* is where mindfulness is very useful, for it involves observing and releasing all those habits of mind that would otherwise preserve and maintain the illusion of a separate self.

