

Should Buddhism Be Therapy?

2011

By Tom Pepper

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Lately, the idea that Buddhism is a kind of psychotherapy seems to be everywhere. And it doesn't just seem that way. In the last hundred and forty years, the Psychinfo database lists 1,695 references to Buddhism; 990 of them, about 58%, occur in the last decade. In the last decade alone, there have been over 100 doctoral dissertations that discuss Buddhism and psychology in some form. Although connections between Buddhism and western psychology were being made from the very beginning of psychology as a discipline, they seem to have really reached critical mass sometime around the turn of the century.

Books on Buddhism are beginning the migration from the "Religion and Philosophy" section to the "Psychology and Self-Help" section, as Buddhism has become the new fad in psychotherapy, with "mindfulness" replacing "cognitive" as the hot new buzz word every kind of therapy needs to add to its name. Although I don't think any of these new fad therapies comes even close to understanding what sati means, or its role in Buddhist practice, I don't want to discuss the problems with the mindfulness industry here.

Instead, I would like to consider whether we really want Buddhism to be transformed into a kind of therapy. It may at first blush seem to be an obvious connection: both Buddhism and psychotherapy seek to relieve suffering, so of course we should look to combine them. What could be better than to graft the age-old wisdom of the Far East onto modern scientific knowledge? It's the best of both worlds, right?

But I think it might be better to consider what it is that psychology, as a discipline, and more specifically the practice of psychotherapy, is really designed to do. And, then, to consider whether Buddhism can fill that function without abandoning everything that makes it a distinct body of practice and thought. In this brief comment, I don't intend to give the final word, but to introduce a framework in which to consider the question. It is my contention that the function of psychology and psychotherapy has always been to adjust individuals to their role in society, to make them more functional and less discontented with the existing social system. I would argue that this is not, and

cannot be, a function that Buddhist thought could possibly serve well—particularly not in the social system of late capitalism.

What does psychology do?

Although this has been written about at length by many philosophers and psychologists (mostly from outside the U.S.), their work has been largely ignored by mainstream psychology, so I will take a moment to recapitulate: psychology was invented as, and continues to serve as, an ideological support for the western capitalist social system; it has never been, and in its present form could not support, a scientific study of the human mind or behavior.

William James was clear on this point when he was trying to introduce the first course in psychology at Harvard; he saw an ideological threat from the popularity of classes in Darwinian theory and Marxism, and believed that a pseudo-scientific version of philosophy would attract more students, and be an opportunity to inculcate capitalist ideology instead of the radical thought being encouraged in these other new courses. He went to Germany, and borrowed from Wundt only the parts of the discipline that would serve his ideological purpose (he had no interest, for example, in Wundt's "Volkerpsychologie"). His new discipline was very popular, and served its purpose well, despite the fact that James himself later lost interest in it. By the twentieth century, the discipline found a new function: combating the dangerously radical implications of psychoanalysis with forms of therapy that were much less prone to lead to serious thought about the structure of the subject and of society. For Freud, to quote Russell Jacobs, "psychoanalysis is negative: a theory of a subject-less subject . . . Negative psychoanalysis is "twice" objective in that it traces at first the objective content of subjectivity, and second, discovers there is only an objective configuration to subjectivity" (p. 80). The content of our subjectivity can be traced all the way through and back out, to the social formations in which we live. If the deepest disturbance of our psyches turns out to be a product of contradictions in social formations, then we might just think about changing them. The neo-Freudians and post-Freudians transformed psychoanalysis into something far more comforting and less radical, "aimed," as Andrew Collier has put it, "at securing adherence to moral ideals by flattering human vanity, not at lessening human misery by creating greater self understanding" (p. 23).

I'm not going to address, here, the dismissal of psychoanalysis as a Victorian ideology. I will simply assert that psychoanalysis is, as Andrew Collier has argued, far more scientific than the discipline of psychology. Everywhere

outside of psychology and a few other social sciences, the naive empiricism of what psychology takes to be the “scientific method” has been so thoroughly discredited that it should hardly be necessary to rehearse the argument yet again. The response of psychology has simply been to stick its head in the sand and ignore all philosophical and scientific arguments that discredit it. There seems to be a general attitude among psychologists that “whatever I refuse to understand can be safely ignored.” As a result, the entire discipline has been producing a positivist ideology of the subject for over a hundred years, in the guise of “science.” This argument has been made quite thoroughly by many people for decades now, and to my knowledge nobody has made a serious attempt to refute it—it has simply been ignored.

And this brings me to the central point about what the clinical branch of psychology does today: psychotherapy is in the business of producing ideology. I mean ideology here in a very specific sense: the set of beliefs and values, embedded in specific practices, which enable people to interact with their world. Ideology need not be false beliefs, although it may include them, but it is not descriptive of reality outside of itself. In Althusser’s terms, it is not the real conditions of existence that ideology presents; rather, it is the set of practices and beliefs in which we function in our real conditions of existence. To produce ideology, then, is not necessarily a bad thing, because, in the Althusserian sense, we must always have ideology. Without it, we would still be living as animals, each generation discovering all over again how to find food and make a fire. The problem is, though, that psychology is producing ideology, and very specifically American capitalist ideology, while pretending to be producing science. Thus, its function is to delude people, to cause people to mistake ideologies for ineluctable truths about the nature of human beings. Its success should not be surprising, since it is the nature of capitalism to require that most its subjects remain deluded about the nature of the social formations in which they participate.

Psychotherapy has become an industry designed to make what Althusser refers to as “bad subjects,” those who don’t function “all by themselves,” back into good, productive, functioning, and most importantly unquestioning citizens of capitalism. I will give just one example, from the most prevalent form of psychotherapy today, cognitive behavioral therapy, although this could easily be demonstrated with every form of therapy in existence, with the possible exception of some forms of psychoanalysis.

When Beck argues that all ills derive from “distortions of reality based on erroneous premises and misconceptions,” and that the role of the therapist is to

help “the patient to identify his warped thinking and to learn more realistic ways to formulate his experiences” (p. 20), he is essentially arguing that the therapist should strive to limit the individual to a very superficial level of thought, to teach her not to question the social construction of the concepts framing her thinking, and to suppress her irrational negative thoughts. Therapy is to be limited to dealing with the reasonableness of judgments about self-worth and abilities, and never to question the very concepts on which those judgments are based. Core beliefs are understood to be at the level of “I am worthless,” but it is hard to imagine any thoughtful human being for whom this is the most basic level of belief.

The plethora of faddish new Buddhism-psychology hybrids have all followed the lead of existing therapies: accepting western, especially American, social forms and values as a transcendent norm, they see their mission as compensating for Buddhism’s “failure,” for its inability to enable people to meet “developmental challenges” or succeed in the workplace or romantic relationships. Buddhism, even for the self-described Buddhists among the multitude of psychologists and psychiatrists in this new field, is seen as inadequate to the demands of modern life, and in need of retooling. The thought that the demands of modern life are at fault is taken as itself a sign of illness, a refusal to “develop” or an infantile demand that the world change to meet our needs; worse, for Buddhism, desire to make changes to the social formation is a sign of failure to achieve equanimity, and so as thoroughly un-Buddhist.

John Welwood, for instance, who has been peddling a purported Buddhist psychotherapy for decades now, clearly sees Buddhism as “avoiding” the demands of “real life.” His therapeutic goal is to help clients achieve “ordinary developmental landmarks—earning a livelihood through dignified, meaningful work, raising a family, sustaining a long-term intimate relationship, belonging to a larger social community” (Fosella, p. 43), instead of questioning that norm. In one of his essays on his website, he discusses the case of a young woman who goes to India and spends seven years studying with Tibetan teachers, but then returns to Europe and is unfortunately unprepared to live out the role of a western wife and mother. He sees this as a failing of Buddhism, but it should not be surprising at all. Producing proper middle class western subjects is the goal of American psychology, not of Tibetan Buddhism. It is unfortunate that after seven years she did not know this, but then, neither does Welwood seem to know what his practice is actually doing.

What Could Buddhism Do?

Is there any way that a correct understanding of the concept of anatman, or of dependent origination, could be harnessed to the goals of psychotherapy? From the perspective of “non-Buddhism” it is, of course, clear that Buddhist practices have very often been successfully used to produce ideologies in a surprisingly wide range of social formations. Perhaps some of these ideologies were not at odds with the ultimate goal of Buddhism (which I consider to be eliminating the suffering of all beings); it may be that some of the forms of subjectivity Buddhism has produced served to promote this goal, and others did not. It would be my hypothesis that those that did not promote this goal did not remain true to these fundamental concepts of anatman and dependent origination, but of course that is something that would require some careful philosophical and historical analysis to determine.

I would suggest, however, that the attempt to produce a Buddhist psychotherapy necessarily requires that we abandon the most important insights of Buddhist thought, or at least distort them in ways that will only promote delusion, and so increase suffering. Perhaps such therapies might even reduce suffering for those who are the immediate recipients, but only at the expense of reproducing social formations that cause suffering for others. To make a rather extreme analogy, it is perfectly possible to imagine a worldview which would make slave owners perfectly happy with their lives, without even any repressed or unexamined suffering; that this world view would not meet the requirement of ending suffering for all beings is clear enough, but only from the outside.

The concept of anatman seems to be the most elusive for the world of psychology today; it is perhaps the most elusive for most people in most times. However, for those willing to entertain the thought of Freud and Lacan, it is no longer difficult to accept that the ego is an illusory misrecognition, and that even the depths of the unconscious turn out to be constructed in language and social formations of which the subject is merely an effect. The concept of anatman has the potential today, as it did in Buddha’s time, to allow us to step outside of our ideological construction, and to use our capacity for symbolic thought to make distinctions between what is produced by human social formations and what is produced by natural causes that will remain beyond our capacity to change. It is precisely the goal of psychology, as a discipline, to blend these two categories into one, and to convince us that the subject as historically produced is an historically transcendent given.

The concept of anatman fundamentally insists on the absolute meaninglessness of

human consciousness, because if we are only the aleatory effect of a structure, arisen for a brief moment of cosmological time, then we can neither be the cause nor the end of what exists. The great insight of Buddhism, and the reason Buddhism can help us to stop suffering and causing others to suffer, is that we humans have the capacity to see the truths about ourselves. When Buddhists go along with the positivist ideology of the subject promoted by psychology, they are giving up the most important component of the human capacity to end suffering: insight, understanding, enlightenment, the ability to see reality clearly. To use a metaphor I have often employed to explain the concept of ideology, ideology assumes you know where you are going, and that the existing roadmap is correct, and sets out to design a useful mode of transportation. The two most pernicious types of ideology are (a) when we produce ideology based on an incorrect concept of reality (in my metaphor, when you build a bus to go across a lake) or (b) when an ideological discourse and its concomitant practice pretend to be producing scientific knowledge (if it tries to convince us that its bus is the only mode of transportation possible). Psychology does both of these; Buddhist thought would have us get off the bus and try to determine what is not on our roadmap. Once we abandon the attachment to the self, our capacity to think about reality improves enormously. This is not, as too many western Buddhists are quick to insist, the arrogance of thought; rather, it is the humility of recognizing how much thinking is left to do! In fact, it is abandoning this challenge that is the height of arrogance, assuming that we have reached the limits of thought already, when in fact we have quite a ways to go. To quote one of my favorite books on the subject of anatman, Peter Harvey's *The Selfless Mind*: "When a person lets go of everything, such that 'his' identity shrinks to zero, then citta expands to infinity. Whatever one grasps at and identifies with as 'I am' limits one" (p. 62).

The power of Buddhist concepts and Buddhist practice could be that they allow us to see reality clearly and produce ideologies that help work to minimize suffering (these ideologies, then, would be the only kind of "views" that, as Buddhists, we must hold lightly). Buddhism cannot be therapeutic in the way psychology wants it to, adjusting subjects to an existing social formation, without distorting beyond recognition (or simply ignoring) the fundamental concepts of Buddhist thought. But, perhaps Buddhism has already become, in the west, too inexorably "therapeutic," in which case non-Buddhism may be the only solution.

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON

WWW.SPECULATIVENONBUDDHISM.COM