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NIRVANA AND DEPRESSION

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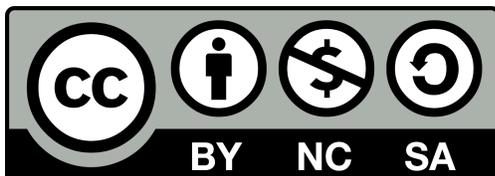
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Nirvana and Depression

NOTE: "Nirvana and Depression" is part of a series of blog posts, which are no longer online but are collected in the ebook [*The Faithful Buddhist*](#). Some passages that are perhaps a bit obscure here are less so in the complete, original context.

Robert Sharf's talk "Mindfulness or Mindlessness" (link below) begins with brief mention of the relationship between enlightenment and depression. If depression involves the "loss of an important source of positive value," and the goal of Buddhist practice is exactly to "let go" of all of our attachments and illusions—effectively, those things that give our lives a sense of "meaningfulness" and allow for enjoyment—then wouldn't the goal of Buddhist practice be to become incurably depressed?

Sharf is quoting from an essay by Gananath Obeyesekere, in which Obeyesekere goes on to suggest that the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice is, in fact, first realizing that "hopelessness lies in the nature of the world" and then "*understanding and overcoming* that hopelessness" (134, emphasis added). This overcoming is possible, he says, because when Buddhist practice is undertaken in a Buddhist culture the "loss" that it produces is, in Obeyesekere's phrase, "anchored to an ideology"(135). That is, the abandonment of the attachments and illusions that comfort us takes place in a particular social practice, so the effect is "intrinsically locked into larger cultural and philosophical issues of existence and problems of meaning"(135). I will return to Obeyesekere's essay later, because I think he offers some very important insights into the cultural causes of depression in the West, and his essay can help us to think more clearly about how to actually solve this pandemic problem.

First, however, I want to briefly address the problem of what exactly depression is, from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. We are all

familiar enough with the list of symptoms found in the DSM-V, but psychology has little to offer us in the way of explaining depression, generally remaining at the level of description. I would suggest that we can make some progress only once we recognize depression as a socially constructed way of interacting with the world—in Buddhist terms, as a conventionally real subjective experience, the causes and conditions of which we can determine in thought.

The attempt to give a Lacanian explanation of depression might seem strange to those familiar with Lacan's work. Lacan almost never mentions depression, and, as one Lacanian analyst has put it “the psychoanalytic clinic refutes any idea of an entity that could be named ‘depression’”(Skriabine). Skriabine's point isn't that we should forget about depression, but that we must avoid the tendency to subsume all discontent with the world as it is under the “non-differentiating cloak of depression” and then respond with the standard pharmacological treatment. Instead, “the psychoanalytic clinic [must] account for each of the very different forms of depression by elaborating how each subject is inscribed, with his suffering, in an articulable structure.” The avoidance of a general diagnosis of “depression” is an attempt to address each individual case as unique, and examine what exactly is leading to the specific set of symptoms. This does not, of course, obviate the need to begin with some idea of what that “articulable structure” is likely to be, and how the psychic structure may fail in ways that look more or less like “depression.”

The classic psychoanalytic text on depression is, of course, Freud's “Mourning and Melancholia.” For Freud, both mourning and melancholia are a result of the loss of a loved object, an object to which libidinal energy has been cathected. The difference is that in mourning there is a gradual diminishing of this libidinal attachment, and the energy is, over time, through ordinary culturally established grieving practices, shifted onto some other object or objects. This cannot, Freud says, happen instantly, because the attachment is not at the conscious level, but exists in “the unconscious thing-presentation of the object” which is “made up of innumerable single impressions (or

unconscious traces of them)”(256). The attachment, then, is like a habit, and can only gradually be replaced with a new set of “innumerable single impressions” so that a new habit forms capable of giving some satisfactory outlet to libidinal energies.

In melancholia, on the other hand, there is some difficulty in abandoning the cathexis, because in “the region of memory traces of *things* (as contrasted with *word-cathexes*)”(256-7), there remains some resistance to abandoning the attachment, something which seeks to “maintain this position of the libido.” This may be in part because in mourning the object lost is an actual object (a real person who has died), while in melancholia the object that is lost can be an “ideal object,” a concept or belief or expectation. I will suggest that one way to understand this is that the loss of an important belief about the world, one central to the person’s actions (job, lifestyle, daily routine), can lead to melancholia precisely because these actions continue, clinging to the “lost” belief at the unconscious level of the “thing presentation” (what Freud called *Dingvorstellung*). What we forget, in dealing with depression, is that it is exactly *not* a response of some essential true self or soul to the unbearable sadness of being, but that it exists in our failure to respond to the gap between our practices and our beliefs—in Lacanian terms, the gap (or contradiction) between the imaginary and the symbolic.

To return to Obeyesekere, then, his suggestion that “affects exist in Western society in a relatively free-floating manner” is exactly what prevents us from dealing with depression. As Obeyesekere suggests, “the affects of depression are not given cultural meaning and significance...in Western society...In this situation, affects exist more or less in a free-floating manner, awaiting a different symbolic formulation: their conceptualization as a ‘disease’: ‘depression’”(148). While Freudian theory would have us arrive at an understanding, in each case, of the practices and beliefs at work, usually unconsciously, in producing depression, Western psychology has simply labelled this symptom a “disease” and refused any explanation that might have to do with anything *outside* the individual—social practices or symbolic

systems, for instance. Fredric Jameson, in a recent book on realist fiction, suggests that the nineteenth century witnessed a transformation of emotion into affect; while the former has meaning in the context of a social situation, the latter must “remain free-floating and independent of [explanatory] factors (which only exist for other people), and this is obviously a function of its temporality as an eternal present, as an element which is somehow self-sufficient, feeding on itself, perpetuating its own existence”(36). Affect, then, becomes the only activity of the eternal, transcendent self—any “meaning” is suspect, part of a somehow insincere and fallen world: “if it means something, it can’t be real; if it is real, it can’t be absorbed by purely mental or conceptual categories” (37). The ideological function of this “free floating affect,” to put it perhaps too bluntly, is to ensure that the modern subject cannot conceive of (and certainly won’t desire) any action that would change the state of her World and perhaps relieve her more unpleasant affects. After all, if our affects are the only activity of our “true self,” why would we want to do anything but “feel” them?

The result, it seems, is a modern subject that is both highly addictable and often addicted. Freud suggests that melancholia would include a “regression from the object-cathexis to the still narcissistic oral phase of libido”(250); Heinz Kohut in *Analysis of the Self*, his well-known book on treatment of narcissistic personality disorders, suggests that a failure of proper object cathexes is the cause of addiction:

[V]ery early traumatic disturbances in the relationship to the archaic idealized self-object and, especially, traumatic disappointments in it may broadly interfere with the development of the basic capacity of the psyche to maintain, on its own, the narcissistic equilibrium of the personality...in personalities who become addicts. The trauma they suffer is most frequently the severe disappointment in a mother who, because of her defective empathy with the child’s needs...did not appropriately fulfill the functions (as a stimulus barrier; as an optimal provider of needed stimuli; as a supplier of

tension-relieving gratification, etc.) which the mature psychic apparatus should later be able to perform (or initiate) predominantly on its own. Traumatic disappointments...deprive the child of the gradual internalization of early experiences of being optimally soothed...Such individuals remain thus fixated on aspects of archaic objects and they find them, for example, in the form of drugs. (46)

Kohut, of course, assumes that the only “normal” or even adequate forms of early cathexes are the bodily, pre-verbal attachment to the mother combined with the ideational attachments in language which result from the idealization of the father. Any alternative objects are “compensatory” and a sign of pathology—in fact, one could say that on Kohut’s definition narcissism is simply a label for anyone who holds any ideals *not* originating in his nuclear family (an interest, say, in politics if one’s father had not been a politician would be “narcissistic” because it is the identification with an ideal produced and maintained in one’s own mind or “psyche,” and not produced by the paternal other). Setting aside such culture-bound biases, however, and for now ignoring Kohut’s assumption of the existence of a “rudimentary archaic self” that is the “center of the psychological universe” and predates any interaction with even the mother (see *The Restoration of the Self*, Chapter 1), can we make some use of Kohut’s observations about the structural causes of addiction?

Is it possible to translate Kohut’s explanation into Lacanian concepts? What if we consider the addictive use of drugs (or alcohol or food, etc.) as a response to the failure of the imaginary register? The imaginary is a kind of bodily experience of and interaction with the world, which would include Freud’s *Dingvorstellung*. The sensory and habitual expenditure of energy in enjoyable ways, however, depends on the interaction of the imaginary with the symbolic, which includes the kinds of concepts that structure our understanding of the world. Kohut assumes the necessity of an ideal mother who gradually disappoints the child, allowing her to develop a “psychic structure”

which centers on an elusive attempt to recover infantile imaginary plenitude, and works to compensate for that loss with moments of intense affect and the conviction that the world just must be accepted as it is. It is possible, however, to understand the failure of the imaginary as a failure of the culturally produced possibilities for meaningful activity in the world. In Lacanian terms, melancholia and addiction would result from the failure of the symbolic system combined with the absence of any useful and meaningful bodily activity. If we are completely interpellated into the dominant postmodern ideology, if we assume that thought is a terrible thing, that reality can't be known in language and concepts, and that all we can know as "real" are our free-floating and meaningless affects, wouldn't the response of depression and addiction make some sense?

To solve this difficulty, to finally begin to address these enormous problems, we would have to begin by forming new kinds of symbolic systems. Our dominant symbolic systems in capitalism are inherently dependent on deception, ignorance and denial—and assume that the goal of a thought is to somehow "reflect" or map the mind-independent world; such a correspondence-theory of thought (or language) simply requires that our symbolic register be structured around a repressed aporia—that we remain to some extent deluded in order for the system to "work." Instead, we can see the symbolic order as a socially produced tool with which we can collectively decide on projects to commit to. Then we would need to commit to these projects in daily activities, in the very rituals of daily life, and stop engaging in social practices of the symbolic system that we no longer accept. To continue to participate in a practice that is structured to reproduce the symbolic system we have consciously abandoned is to fall into the dilemma Freud explains for us as the problem of melancholia: we are unconsciously clinging, in our actions, to a symbolic object that we no longer consciously accept. When the activity of our imaginary register fails, and we have no symbolic capacity to guide us in the production of new social practices, or no collective that can (to use somewhat Hegelian language) give recognition to the social practices of our collective project, we fall into

despair or addiction, including addiction to antidepressants, as a last-ditch attempt to stave off total subjective disintegration. The common “treatment,” of course—as Lacan suggests in “The Direction of Treatment and the Principles of Its Power”—is to use an unexamined identification with the therapist to attempt to reinterpellate the individual into the deluded beliefs of hegemonic ideology; that this almost always fails with depressives and addicts is perhaps testament to the capacity of thought to exceed the attempts at mystification and obfuscation so essential to capitalist ideology.

The difficulty with working toward Buddhist enlightenment is that it would require that we set out to fully dismantle our symbolic order, even begin to put a new one in its place. For what else is enlightenment but the rejection of the reifications and delusions required by the dominant symbolic systems of capitalist social formations? As Nagarjuna describes it, the pursuit of Nirvana would sound like a recipe for self-induced melancholia. Here are two translations of what is probably Nagarjuna’s most explicit statement concerning the attainment of nirvana, from the *Yuktisastika*, verses 10-12:

10

When one discerns with precise intuition
What occurs conditioned by misknowledge,
One does not experience anything,
Whether created or ceased.

11

That is immediate nirvana,
And that very thing is “attaining the goal.”
If, after that insight into the truth,
One discovers any particular here,

Imagining any sort of creation,
 In anything, however subtle,
 Such an unwise individual
 Does not see the meaning of “conditioned arising.”

—Joseph Lozio’s translation, in *Nagarjuna’s Reason Sixty (Yuktisastikā)*

When one sees with correct knowledge that which arises conditioned by ignorance, no origination or destruction whatsoever is perceived.

This is nirvana in this very life—one’s task is accomplished. But if a distinction is made here, just before knowledge of the Dharma—

On who imagines that even the most subtle thing arises: Such an ignorant man does not see what it means to be dependently born!

—Christian Lindtner’s translation, in *Master of Wisdom*

Although the difficulties in translating philosophical terms makes these passages slightly obscure, I think it is clear enough that they are best summed up in the terms Jay Garfield uses in his commentary on the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*: “When all reification ceases, that world and one’s mode of living in it, becomes nirvana...nirvana is simply samsara seen without reification, without attachment, without delusion”(329-331). The concern, for Nagarjuna, is that if even one thing is held as being beyond causes and conditions, as being “created” or arisen on its own, not dependently, then we fall immediately back into delusion and cannot inhabit nirvana.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the “objects” which structure our interaction with the world have both a symbolic and an imaginary component—they are both ideational and bodily, habitual

attachments. When we lose all of our objects, and there is no practice in which to transition our attachment, our libidinal cathexes, to new objects, this, for Freud, is the very definition of melancholia. If the goal of Buddhist practice is both to abandon all reification and attachment, and then to avoid the tendency for new attachments and reifications to slip subtly back in, wouldn't we be left in a state of melancholia? Is nirvana, then, nothing but permanent and total depression?

To respond to this, let's turn to another text that is usually attributed to Nagarjuna (although it exists only in a Chinese recension): *The Bodhisambhara Sastra*. In this text, Nagarjuna seems to be fully aware of the dangers of seeking enlightenment, particularly the dangers of stopping at the point of abandoning all attachments, of recognizing the conventional nature of all concepts. The difficulty is clear: once we realize that all of our concepts are socially produced in our symbolic systems, they lose their appeal as psychological objects, and we lose any motivation to act in the world. Nagarjuna warns us, therefore, that to “base [one's] actions on sunyata by apprehending sunyata...this error amounts to the fault of belief in a personal substance”(Verse 151; Lindtner, p. 148). To stop at emptiness is just as serious an error as to be in the delusion that one has a transcendent self of any kind—it is a form of clinging that leads to what is sometimes referred to as “bodhisattva death.” Earlier in the *Bodhisambhara*, Nagarjuna warns us that “Until one develops the great compassion and the patience...The bodhisattva is still subject to a form of ‘dying’”(Verse 24; Dharmamitra, p. 29). It is essential, according to this text, to continuously make effort to produce the right kinds of thoughts and habits *without believing them to be in any way “natural” or unconstructed*—that is, we must learn to produce our ideology without reification. The Buddhist seeking enlightenment rejects all the things which ordinarily give us a sense of importance, self-worth and enjoyment (“Profit, reputation, honors, and pleasure are four things one should not be attached to”(Verse 20; Lindtner, p. 127). Instead, we need to work to “benefit living beings without tiring and without carelessness...to benefit others is to benefit oneself!”

(Verse 18; Lindtner, p. 127). Further, we must make constant intellectual effort, examining our “discursive thought” and “abandoning the unwholesome and increasing the wholesome” thoughts (Verse 85; Lindtner, p. 138). Thinking and constant effort is the path of the bodhisattva, according to Nagarjuna. A far cry from the passive, thought-free acceptance promoted by most Western Buddhism today.

The difficulty with working toward Buddhist enlightenment in our culture is that we are attempting to replace a symbolic system without making any alteration in our real material interactions in the world. We want to become enlightened in order to go on acting in thoroughly unenlightened ways—reproducing the core delusions of capitalist ideology, for instance, by continuing to participate in the illusion of exchange value, and doing so ever more efficiently, effectively, and “mindfully.” We believe we can do this because we understand thought as a “reflection” of the world, rather than as an action *in* the world. This error is probably essential to the mistaken belief that we reinvest our engagement of the world with libidinal energy through “mindfulness” practice solely at the level of the imaginary, with no thought or meaning at the symbolic level; what “mindfulness” is doing, however, is more likely helping the practitioner ward off the crises at the level of the symbolic register, by refusing to think about it. This may work for a time, provided the contradictions inherent in capitalist social formations can be successfully excluded from the individual’s life. For those who aren’t willing to remain deluded, however, it will inevitably lead to frustration and depression. What we must seek to do, instead, is to consciously choose the actual concrete practices we would like to make meaningful and enjoyable in our daily lives; we must use our symbolic capacity to produce better objects, in the psychoanalytic sense, to which we can develop cathexes—in short, we need to consciously choose our ideology.

For most of us in the West, this hardly seems possible. For Kohut, for instance, such intentionally cultivated objects are at best a pale substitute for those which occur “naturally” in the bourgeois nuclear

family and which remain unexamined—they are “compensatory,” and adequate only in the case of narcissists whose “psychic structure” is beyond complete repair. Even for Heidegger, as Hubert Dreyfuss makes clear, if “all were clear about our ‘presuppositions,’ our actions would lack seriousness...what is most important and meaningful in our lives is not and should not be accessible to critical reflection”(4). We can’t possibly, it is assumed, be *in* ideology and know that we are—because to know it as an ideology would deprive it of all its motivating power, and sink us into melancholy.

Nagarjuna, apparently, did not agree. As I have discussed elsewhere (*Cruel Theory | Sublime Practice*, 42-43), neither did Aristotle, for whom the development of character depends upon our ability to consciously produce and maintain our habits of interaction with the world. What I’m suggesting, then, is that we attempt to follow the advice of these thinkers from Western and Eastern antiquity. We can begin by understanding conceptually how our symbolic construal of the world is socially constructed, and abandoning reification at the level of discursive thought; however, if we then continue to engage in the practices that support these symbolic structures, we are bound to be left in a state of depression as Freud defines it, with our imaginary register struggling to hold onto cathexes our symbolic system is attempting to abandon. Tsung-mi, the ninth-century Chinese Buddhist master Sharf also mentions briefly in his talk, suggests that the breaking through of delusion can be a sudden and abrupt event, but the development of an enlightened subjectivity is a long and arduous process (see Gregory, *Inquiry Into the Origin of Humanity* pp. 185-188). Tsung-mi, of course, accepts the existence of an atman which is gradually purified by practice after conceptual enlightenment. I would suggest that on Nagarjuna’s atman-free model, practice is not a process of purification but of *construction*, and it must be done collectively.

To end, then, with terminology perhaps more Hegelian than Buddhist, we must understand that the mind is both social *and collectively* produced, and that to live in nirvana is to live as an “absolute

community,” one which collectively chooses to undertake social projects and in which each individual is part of, and receives the recognition of, the community. It does take a sangha, then, to produce an enlightened subject; to attempt enlightenment alone is to risk the Bodhisattva death of profound depression.

While it may be possible for a “virtual community” to serve as a kind of collective mind, it remains essential to attempt to produce living sanghas of Faithful Buddhists in which to practice in our daily lives.

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Online Discussion

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SPECULATIVE NON-BUDDHISM

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