

COPING WITH SUFFERING: The Buddhist Perspective

Yu-Hsi Chen

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism, originated in India, has been an influential cultural force in Asia for more than 2500 years. In recent decades, it has gained increasing acceptance in the West, especially North America, largely through mindful meditation. As a religious philosophy, its distinctive feature consists in the attainment of spiritual liberation through awakening of the mind from the bondage of greed, hatred, and delusion. Unlike theistic religions, Buddhist faith is directed first towards Buddha's teachings and then towards the moral and spiritual qualities of the historical Buddha, the celestial Buddhas (regarded as awakened sentient beings) and other Buddhist saints. While the Pure Land School of Buddhism seeks salvation through faith in Amitabha Buddha and His Pure Land, ultimately that faith is tied to a mental capacity to surrender one's ego so that spiritual awakening and liberation can be achieved.

Considered as a major religion today, Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, the prince of an ancient Indian state, initially as a system of mental cultivation aimed at achieving liberating insights and compassion. Following his death, he was revered as the Buddha (meaning the Awakened One in Sanskrit), and his followers held several councils over a period of some 600 years to verify and compile his teachings. As a result, two major streams have come into existence: the conservative Theravada (Southern Buddhism) and the more evolved and adaptive Mahayana Buddhism (great vehicle). The former, now prevalent in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Laos, adheres to the early scriptures believed to embody the authentic teachings of the Buddha. Because its practice emphasizes the individual's liberation rather than the salvation of all sentient beings, it is also called Hinayana (lesser vehicle) by its detractors. By contrast, the latter, dominant in China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, stresses the ideal of Bodhisattvas – enlightened beings who vow to save all sentient beings from suffering. In addition to the early scriptures, the Mahayana is enriched by the profound commentarial literature of a number of prominent scholars, who respectively helped establish several Mahayana schools, including Madhyamika (Middle Way), Yogacara

Yu-Hsi Chen, Fo Guang College of Humanities and Social Sciences; Yu-Hsi Chen, Professor, Department of Religious Studies, Fo Guang College of Humanities and Social Sciences, 160, Linwei Road, Chiao-Hsi, Ilan County, Taiwan

(Mind-Only), Pure Land, Avatamsaka (Hua Yen) and the Esoteric (being practiced in Tibet). The Mahayana also owns a tremendous number of evolved scriptures, such as the Lotus Sutra, Surangama (Leng Yen) Sutra, Amitabha Sutra, Avatamsaka (Hua Yen) Sutra, etc., just to name a few. These texts, along with the commentarial literature, develop insights into the nature of the mind and the Ultimate Reality. For the first time in the history of spiritual philosophy, the transcendental non-dual Absolute known as *Sunyata* (Pure Emptiness) was revealed as the highest possible stage in the evolution of human consciousness. It is called Emptiness because in that supreme state of enlightened consciousness, the mind is pure and “empty” of all mental constructs and defilements and transcends the dualistic consciousness. Along with Pure Emptiness comes the realization of wisdom and intelligence of the highest order as well as unconditioned love and compassion.

A special feature of Mahayana Buddhism is the development of Zen (*Chan* in Chinese) Buddhism. Based on no particular scripture, Zen is a practice aimed at enlightenment through “direct seeing” of the true nature of the mind. It was introduced to China in the sixth century by an Indian monk named Bodhidharma and transmitted all the way to the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng (638-713 A.D.), whose teachings embodied in the *Platform Sutra* stand out as a brilliant example of enlightenment through intuitive insights into the “self-nature” (true Self). Zen later found its way to Japan and has exerted a powerful influence on the Japanese culture and art. Japanese Zen master and scholar D. T. Suzuki introduced it to the West through his English writings in the early 20th century. Thanks to Suzuki’s efforts, Westerners are familiar with the Japanese term “Zen” rather than its Chinese origin.

1.1. The Story of Siddhartha Gautama

Prince Siddhartha was endowed with an extraordinary sensitivity to feel human sufferings and the unfulfilling nature of human existence, even though he was born to a royal family with all its luxuries and material comforts. He decided to pursue the truth of life so that he might save fellow humans from sufferings. For this purpose he renounced his position as a successor to the throne, left his beloved wife, son and father behind and went in search of spiritual wisdom at the age of 29. After six years he became fully enlightened and spent the next 45 years teaching the principles and techniques of spiritual liberation until his death at the age of 80. Legends have it that he developed psychic powers to see his previous lives and sentient beings in all realms of the Cosmos. But from the perspective of spiritual knowledge, what is really significant and relevant is that he succeeded in purifying himself of the mental defilements of craving, aversion and ignorance, and transforming his human consciousness into a supreme state of enlightened consciousness, whereby he developed unconditional love and compassion, and also gained profound insights into the universal laws of causation and the nature of existence. Among other things, he discovered that all things and lives arose from complex causation and co-existed in cosmic networks of interdependence. According to his teachings, people who understand the Four Noble Truths and practice the Eightfold Path (see introduction below) in earnest will arrive at a deep realization of these universal truths, thereby realizing their oneness with all beings and freeing themselves from the fetters of the illusory ego to achieve the same enlightenment and liberation as the Buddha himself had experienced. However, he emphatically warned against

taking his teachings as dogmas and stressed the importance of experimenting through practice.

1.2. The Buddhist Perspective on Stress and Coping

Buddhism provides a very unique perspective on stress, which differs, both in assumptions and emphasis, from the prevailing paradigm on stress and coping in American psychology. Buddhism offers a more general framework of suffering and stress, and this conceptual framework characterizes the Buddhist view of the human condition. In the West, stress is originally an engineering concept referring to the external pressure exerted on some structure or material. Therefore, psychological stressors typically refer to events external to the individual. In contrast, Buddhism locates the primary source of stress and suffering within individuals – it is the psychological mechanism of craving and aversion and the ignorance about its workings that are responsible for most of our troubles and difficulties in life.

Similarly, Buddhism also provides a much broader and proactive view of coping. Firstly, coping is more than a reaction to a specific stressful situation, but a pathway to be free from all of life's troubles and sorrows. Secondly, the goal of coping is not stress reduction but the transformation of whatever that is troubling us. Thirdly, effective coping depends on personal transformation, which can be achieved only through mental disciplines and enlightenment. Finally, successful personal transformation not only results in freedom from distress and suffering, but also in attainment of an inner state of serenity and compassion.

In order to practice the Buddhist way of coping, we need to understand the basic tenets known as the Four Noble Truths, which are the original teachings of the Buddha. (Rahula, 1972, chapters 2-5; Keown, 1996, chapter 4)

1. The Truth of Suffering (*Dukkha*): Life is full of suffering. In the Buddhist context, “suffering” not only refers to pain and distress caused by adverse circumstances, but more importantly, to spiritual vacuum and disillusionment resulting from the unfulfilling, illusory nature of desires, and to tension, stress and afflictions that stem from emotional attachments to worldly possessions. Thus the relevant implications of the Buddhist teachings on suffering should be found in the overall unhappiness as well as the widespread neuroses and mental troubles that plague modern society.
2. The Truth of Arising of Suffering (*Tanha*): Suffering comes from craving and aversion. Craving causes suffering in the way that fire consumes wood. In a vivid metaphor, “the Buddha spoke of all human experience as being ‘ablaze’ with desire. Fire is an appropriate metaphor for desire since it consumes what it feeds on without being satisfied. It spreads rapidly, become attached to new objects, and burns with the pain of unassuaged longing” (Keown, 1996, p. 49). It should be noted that craving always goes together with its antithesis – aversion – to form a psychological mechanism of defense. When we crave for something, such as pleasant sensations, we tend to reject its opposite, such as unpleasant sensations. This defense mechanism of craving and aversion, which is responsible for suffering, results from the primordial ignorance of the truth of human existence. Thus when Buddhism speaks of craving (or greed) and aversion (or hatred), it also speaks of ignorance (or delusion).
3. The Truth of Liberation from Suffering (*Nirvana*): We can be freed from suffering by transforming our craving and aversion, or equivalently, by dispelling the dark clouds

of ignorance and confusion with the light of liberating wisdom. The resulting mental state of perfect peace, serenity, and compassion is called *Nirvana*. One who attains *Nirvana* also attains freedom from rebirth after death. As Keown (1996, pp. 52-53) explains, "What is extinguished, in fact, is the triple fire of greed, hatred, and delusion which leads to rebirth. Indeed, the simplest definition of nirvana-in-this-life is as 'the end of greed, hatred, and delusion.'" Furthermore, the state of "final Nirvana" after death, namely, freedom from rebirth, is neither annihilation nor the eternal existence of a personal soul (Keown, 1996, p. 53). It transcends all dualities.

4. The Truth of the Eightfold Path (*Magga*): Liberation from suffering can be achieved through the cultivation and practice of eight disciplines, namely, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, right meditation, right thought, and right understanding. These eight factors are divided into three categories: Morality, Meditation, and Wisdom. Right speech, right action, and right living are the basic moral disciplines required for spiritual transformation. In this regard, the most important thing to remember is not to speak, to act and to make a living in such a way as to harm others and oneself. The second category of Meditation requires assiduous efforts to practice mindfulness in everyday life as well as in formal meditation. This practice leads to increasingly high levels of mental concentration and awareness that give rise to Wisdom, the third category of disciplines. Liberating wisdom consists of unselfish, compassionate thoughts and intuitive insights into the truth of life (right understanding). Wisdom in this context implies a mental capacity to let go of the reactive mechanism of craving (greed) and aversion (hatred) as well as all mental defilements and negativities that stem from that mechanism. In other words, wisdom in the Buddhist sense is always the wisdom of spiritual liberation.

The following sections of this chapter will focus on Buddhist concepts, principles, and practices that are essential for our understanding of the Buddhist way of coping with suffering.

2. THE BUDDHIST CONCEPTION OF SUFFERING

The first sermon that the historical Buddha gave was on "suffering" and the way to cope with it. Throughout the Buddhist history, "suffering" is a recurring theme for practitioners, preachers, and scholars of Buddhism. Buddhists tend to associate life with a "boundless sea of suffering." And a major goal of the Buddhist spiritual practice, as interpreted by Chinese Buddhism, is "to end suffering and gain happiness." What do these statements actually mean? Since the Chinese term for suffering, *Ku*, also means "pain" and "hardship," these statements are often misinterpreted to mean that Buddhism has an aversion to the adverse circumstances and a preference for "happiness". Nothing can be further from the truth.

A deeper look into the Buddhist psychology shows that its approach to suffering is existentially based rather than metaphysical abstraction. The first thing we need to know is that although the Sanskrit word "*dukkha*" (literally translated as "suffering") refers to specific sufferings of life originating from external circumstances, such as wars, famines, and diseases, it also conveys more subtle meanings that are foreign to the Western mind.

As we have seen in the above section, Buddhism traces suffering to an internal causation, namely, the psychological mechanism of craving and aversion. Suffering in the

Buddhist sense also comes from the psychological experience of the law of “impermanence,” i.e., the feelings of satisfaction and pleasure disappear quickly. As Keown aptly explains, “The problem.... is that good times do not last; sooner or later they fade away, or one becomes bored with what once seemed novel and full of promise. In this context the word *dukkha* has a more abstract and pervasive sense: it suggests that even when life is not painful it can be unsatisfactory and unfulfilling. In this and many other contexts ‘unsatisfactoriness’ captures the meaning of *dukkha* better than ‘suffering.’” (Keown, 1996, p. 47)

2.1. Ignorance of Truth as the Root Cause of Suffering

The Buddha points to the cognitive ignorance of the truth of life as the root cause of all sufferings. That ignorance, or delusion, which is identified as a universal primordial trait of human existence, gives rise to the reactive mechanism of clinging and rejecting, or of craving and aversion. We hold on to whatever is seen as desirable, such as pleasure and success, while rejecting whatever is seen as undesirable, such as pain and failure. Our craving for pleasure, good fortune and good health necessarily causes us to reject their antitheses, i.e., pain, misfortune, and illnesses. But the latter are unavoidable occurrences in our everyday lives, and when they come, they cause suffering precisely because we reject them, or relate to them with fear and aversion. Even pleasure cannot last, insofar as all pleasant sensations diminish in intensity from one moment to another, manifesting the universal law of “impermanence.” Our emotional attachments to what is impermanent inevitably generate the feelings of emptiness, disappointment and disillusionment, which constitute part of *dukkha* by definition. Such feelings can accumulate and escalate into the distressing experience which we call “suffering.”

2.2. Liberation from Suffering

Insofar as the Buddhist sees suffering as a symptom of man’s primordial ignorance and delusion, it is a moral imperative – and not just a therapeutic need – to end suffering, and this is accomplished by learning – through insight and wisdom – to accept pain and adversities. The more a person can bear pain and adversities with equanimity, the less he or she will experience “suffering” and the greater is his or her mental capacity to achieve inner freedom, serenity, and happiness. In other words, Buddhism teaches that we can become liberated from suffering by learning to be liberated from the ego’s desires, fears, and other mental defilements.

According to Buddhism, the reactive pattern of the mind implies one’s refusal to accept both pain and pleasure as inevitable aspects of human existence. This failure to embrace life’s experience in its entirety is at the root of suffering. Thus from the Buddhist perspective, to end suffering ultimately means to be liberated from the bondage of delusion and of its concomitant mechanism of clinging and rejecting. Rather than rejecting pain and holding on to pleasure, we learn to accept both, to eliminate our habitual pattern of the reactive mind and attain “equanimity” – a state of even-mindedness in which we see things as they are without reacting with negative emotions. As meditation teacher Goenka (1992) explains, “once one learns to observe objectively without identifying with the sensations, then the process of purification starts, and the old habit of blind reaction of multiplying one’s misery is gradually weakened and broken” (p. 39).

3. THE HEALING FORCE OF BUDDHIST MEDITATION

As we have already explained in Section 1, in the time of the Buddha, the way to end suffering is known as the “Eightfold Path”, which provides a set of principles and methods to achieve personal transformation. The Eightfold Path focuses on moral conduct and mental discipline. The moral aspect prescribes that one does no harm to oneself and others, and that mental defilements, such as greed, excessive desire, hatred, anger, animosity, selfishness, etc., be eradicated. This moral discipline is combined with the mental training of meditation and contemplation to achieve insights and wisdom that emancipate the mind from the primordial ignorance and the concomitant reactive mechanism of craving and aversion. In line with the teachings of the Eightfold Path, subsequent developments of Buddhism all emphasize mindful meditation as an effective method of purifying mental defilements and attaining the wisdom of liberation.

3.1. Meditation as a Way of Transformation and Coping

In talking about the Buddhist perspective on coping with stress and suffering, we should not neglect the healing and transformational forces of meditation. There are various schools of meditation in Buddhism. The meditation techniques of Southern Buddhism (the Theravada) emphasize the cultivation of mindfulness and awareness directed toward the body, feelings, sensations, and mental activities. Equally important is to develop equanimity, i.e., to learn to remain non-judgmental with regard to whatever happens internally and externally. Mindfulness coupled with equanimity is essential to purify the mind of the three basic defilements of craving, aversion and ignorance, thereby eradicating the roots of suffering (Goenka, 1992).

Apart from Southern Buddhism, the Zen School, the Tibetan Esoteric, the Tien Tai School, etc., have also developed different techniques of meditation, all aimed at spiritual liberation and enlightenment. The Esoteric meditation resorts to visualization and contemplation on a divine symbol or image, combined with a bodily gesture and recitation of a mantra. It is claimed to be an effective way to develop spiritual energy. However, it could produce harmful effects if done without a basic discipline in mental purification and proper guidance by a qualified teacher (Moacanin, 2003, chapter 6).

When practiced with proper guidance, Buddhist meditation of all styles can be remarkably efficacious in improving general health conditions, both physical and mental. Above all, it helps relieve stress and anxiety. In many cases it is reported to have positive effects on depression and other neurotic disorders. We need to note, however, that meditation in Buddhism is not intended to be an exercise or a therapy for health purpose. Rather, it is regarded as an integral part of the Buddhist practice aimed at achieving spiritual liberation and personal transformation. Its efficacy for the relief of stress and the cure of neuroses is considered as only a by-product of that practice. As liberation in the Buddhist sense means to free the mind from the primordial ignorance and delusion marked by the ego’s habitual pattern of grasping and rejecting, any intent to change things as they are or to get rid of something undesirable falls into that pattern and therefore stands in the way of spiritual awakening and liberation. This does not mean that one should not take a meditation course unless he or she is prepared to follow the Buddhist path. This does mean that in taking the course, one should not be

motivated by a utilitarian desire for gains, but should learn to develop a new outlook on life, a new mental attitude that emphasizes unconditional acceptance of one's own situation, no matter how difficult it may be. In fact, this new mentality is an integral part of the Buddhist meditation training. Once a practitioner learns to surrender his ego's desires and fears and to accept himself with equanimity, he is empowered with a liberating insight that will go a long way towards improving his health conditions. By the Buddhist standard, one is not considered a successful practitioner of meditation unless such an insight is attained.

3.2. The Practice of Mindfulness

This being said, we can now turn to the practice of mindfulness. Right mindfulness is the seventh component of the Eightfold Path. As Levine (2000) states, "Mindfulness is an essential process in attaining self-transformation and enlightenment. It is through mindfulness that we come to verify the teachings. It also contributes to other components of the path" (p. 73). For example, mindful meditation can be practiced to increase self-awareness of feelings, thoughts, and bodily functions. Right mindfulness detects mental defilements as soon as they arise and, as a result, helps eliminate the habitual pattern of emotional reactions. Furthermore, it sharpens the mental force of self-introspection so that the karmic complexes hidden deep in the unconscious can be brought to light and dissolved. Goenka (1992) explains how the process works as follows: "In such a moment (of mindful observation of breathing and sensations), the mind is free from the three basic defilements, that is, it is pure. This moment of purity at the conscious level has a strong impact on the old impurities accumulated in the unconscious. The contact of these positive and negative forces produces an explosion. Some of the impurities hidden in the unconscious rise to the conscious level, and manifest as various mental or physical discomforts." When one faces such a situation, he/she is advised not to react to the discomforts with fear and anxiety. Instead, "it would be wise to understand that what seems to be a problem is actually a sign of success in the meditation, an indication that in fact the technique has started to work" (p. 6).

A beginner is directed to develop mindfulness by paying full attention first to the breath. It involves learning to inhale and exhale slowly and observing the breathing with attentiveness but without making any judgment. After a period of training on breathing, the practice shifts to mindfulness of bodily sensations and whatever occurs within the body and the mind. Finally the practitioner can be trained to develop full awareness, which includes insights into one's own mind as well as the impermanent nature of all phenomena.

The practice of mindfulness puts a great emphasis on "bare" attention and "pure" awareness in the sense that the practitioner is not drawn into the mind's old habit of making discriminative judgments, which lead to the reactive pattern of craving for what is judged as pleasant and aversion to what is judged as unpleasant. This non-judgmental quality allows one to be freed from emotional reactivity and to observe the mental conditions with an unbiased open mind, thereby cultivating the mental capacity of unconditional self-acceptance. All of these combine to produce what is called *panna* (liberating insights or wisdom), along with a positive therapeutic effect on stress and suffering and overall mental health.

3.3. Health Benefits of Meditation

On the physiological and neurological levels, numerous medical studies have shown that meditation can boost the immune system and “rewire” the brain to reduce stress by increasing the theta brain waves and bringing about a more balanced secretion of neurotransmitters such as endorphins. These subtle physiological and neurological changes provide an effective antidote to stress, anxiety and depression. According to a recent cover story of *Time Magazine*,

Meditation is being recommended by more and more physicians as a way to prevent, slow or at least control the pain of chronic diseases like heart conditions, AIDS, cancer and infertility. It is also being used to restore balance in the face of such psychiatric disturbances as depression, hyperactivity and attention-deficit disorder (ADD). In a confluence of Eastern mysticism and Western science, doctors are embracing meditation not because they think it's hip or cool but because scientific studies are beginning to show that it works, particularly for stress-related conditions (Stein, 2003, p. 49).

There are reports that chronic depression was cured or at least relieved by the practice of mindful meditation. One such case is cited in the *Time* story, which quotes Professor John Teasdale of Cambridge University as saying that mindful meditation helped chronically depressed patients, reducing their relapse rate by half. It also quotes Wendy Weisel, the daughter of two Holocaust survivors and author of *Daughters of Absence*, as saying that she took medication for most of her life until she started meditating two years ago. “There’s an astounding difference,” she reports. “You don’t need medication for depression or for tension. I’m on nothing for the first time in my life” (Stein, 2003, p. 52). A question arises as to whether it is practical to recommend meditation as a therapy for depression and other neuroses. It is noted that many sufferers of depression lack a will and determination strong enough to sit through a meditation session, even if they care to try in the first place. Moreover, some Western psychotherapists appreciate meditation but are nevertheless concerned that cultural differences may prevent Western patients from developing a mental attitude commensurate with the practice of meditation. The classical psychologist Carl Jung, for all his enthusiasm for the Buddhist practice, hesitated to recommend meditation of the Tibetan style to his patients of neuroses because he thought that Westerners might not be able to comprehend the essence of Tibetan Buddhism properly due to cultural gaps, and that the Tibetan style of contemplative meditation without adequate spiritual preparation could evoke negative psychical forces from the unconscious that could aggravate rather than improve the mental health conditions of the patient (Moacanin, 2003, chapter 6). As a matter of fact, there have been cases where students suffered from a recurrence of their mental illness during the course of meditation.

However, psychologist and meditation teacher John Welwood (1983 and 2000) has stressed all the way that negative feelings and emotions do not have to be a problem if we know how to relate to them directly through insight meditation. When one judges his feelings of sadness negatively and gets entangled in the emotional story lines, Welwood explains, these feelings become “frozen” and – if in the absence of mindfulness these story lines are allowed to spin into a vicious circle – can lead to more intense emotions

of depression. However, if we learn from Buddhist meditation how to open our hearts to feelings and emotions, befriending them, touching them with tenderness and accepting them as impermanent, ever-changing phenomena like floating clouds, then even the frozen emotions of depression can be “transmuted” into a spiritual treasure that enriches our lives (Welwood, 2000; 1985, pp. 79-90). Thus, the question of whether meditation is beneficial to neurosis patients really depends on individual cases and on what kinds of meditation techniques are employed. Generally speaking, when therapeutic work has succeeded in changing the life attitude of a patient, insight meditation that aims at self-acceptance can be safely recommended, if the therapist is an experienced meditation practitioner himself. A Buddhist meditation course directed by a qualified teacher appears to be safe and beneficial for the general public except those with a history of serious mental illness. In any case, the importance of learning through meditation to cultivate a new mental attitude of tolerance, forgiveness, and acceptance needs to be emphasized.

4. THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY OF BUDDHIST COMPASSION

This article begins with a discussion of how suffering arises from delusion and the consequent reactive pattern of the mind, and how suffering can be overcome with insight, wisdom, and personal transformation. Now we are talking about love and compassion as an outcome of transformation and as an antidote to suffering. To be enlightened is to be filled with love and compassion for those who are still in the bondage of suffering. The Buddha is known both as The Enlightened One and The Compassionate One. The Buddha’s mission is to share the wisdom of enlightenment in order to liberate everyone from suffering.

4.1. The Oneness of Love, Compassion, and Wisdom

Therefore, from the perspective of Buddhist psychology, wisdom and love are inter-related. As the Indian sage Nisargadatta Maharaj observes, “Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything. Between the two my life flows.” In terms of Buddhism, this means that when a person develops the insight that the ego consciousness is a delusion – a false view of the self as a “real” entity separate from other beings, he or she is liberated from the straitjacket of the ego to embrace all beings – the larger Self – with universal love and compassion. However, this does not mean that love is uncovered only when wisdom presents itself, but rather that the two come in an interactive circle, that a measure of love and compassion is needed to open the heart shut off by ego-centeredness so that wisdom can flow. As love and compassion grows, so will the wisdom of liberation, and vice versa.

Thus the practice of loving-kindness as taught by Salzberg (1997) is consistent with the teaching of the Buddha, and should be taken as a useful practice that helps to open the heart with love to accept all situations and all people. With the sunshine of loving-kindness, the dark clouds of fear, aversion, and suffering are dispelled, giving way to joy and happiness. The attainment of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity in a transpersonal sense is identical to the attainment of insight and wisdom as conceived by Buddhism.

In this connection, a theoretical issue with regard to suffering needs to be mentioned in passing. According to *the Abhidharma*, an earliest Buddhist canon containing the Buddha's teachings on human psychology, insight and wisdom is the key determining factor of mental well-being. Where insight and wisdom is, delusion cannot be; and when insight and wisdom is present, the other healthy factors, such as love, joy and equanimity, also arise (Goleman, 1980, p. 133).

Consequently, when Buddhism talks about ending suffering with wisdom, the purpose is not merely to make people "feel better," or to bring about happiness as such, but more importantly, to achieve perfect mental well-being, and to allow for personal growth and development on a transpersonal level beyond the reach of mainstream psychology. To end suffering also implies the fulfillment of the Four Noble States of Mind – love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – which mark a Bodhisattva, the ideal type of a fully awakened person who is committed to working for the salvation of all sentient beings.

4.2. The Practice of Loving-kindness

Not everybody can meet such an arduous challenge. But there are alternative methods with a similar transpersonal orientation that can be easily practiced in our everyday lives. Sharon Salzberg (1997), for example, recommends the practice of loving-kindness as a "revolutionary art of happiness." It includes contemplative reflections on one's own goodness and loving-kindness as a way of enhancing self-worth. As she explains,

We begin to develop rapture by rejoicing in our own goodness. We reflect on the good things we have done, recollecting times when we have been generous, or times when we have been caring. Perhaps we can think of a time when it would have been easy to hurt somebody, or to tell a lie, or to be dismissive, yet we made the effort not to do that. Perhaps we can think of a time when we gave something up in a way that freed our mind and helped someone else. Or perhaps we can think of a time when we have overcome some fear and reached out to someone. These reflections open us to a wellspring of happiness that may have been hidden from us before (Salzberg, 1997, pp. 14-15).

The beneficial effect of meditation can be enhanced and reinforced by the practice of loving-kindness, which includes charitable actions and the practice of forgiveness as well as love-sharing through meditative contemplation. An overriding feature of this Buddhist approach is the emphasis placed on love as a unique power to overcome fear, hatred, and mental suffering. As Salzberg observes, "love can uproot fear or anger or guilt, because it is a greater power" than "the forces in the mind that bring suffering" (Salzberg, 1997, p. 23). And the practice of *metta* (loving-kindness) begins with befriending ourselves. She quotes the Buddha as saying, "You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection" (Salzberg, 1997, p. 25). The psychological implications of self-love as a foundation for loving others become clear when we realize how people with low self-esteem are deprived of the capacity to love. Yet, self-love is not to be confused with narcissism and self-centeredness. It comes from a process of healthy personal growth in which the actualization of our personal potentials, especially in the service of others, brings us joy and happiness, and enhances

our self-worth rather than self-conceit. To love ourselves is to be continuously in touch with this source of joy and happiness, and to learn to appreciate the goodness we have in us. Self-love in this sense is eroded by all egoistic and narcissistic tendencies, including self-aggrandizement and self-abasement. Conversely it is enriched by our willingness to open our hearts and minds to accept all situations and all people, to touch our pain and sorrow with tenderness and compassion, and to reach out to others in need of help (Chen, 2004).

According to Salzberg (1997), self-love can be cultivated through the contemplative process of directing *metta* (loving-kindness) to ourselves in meditation, and of reflecting on our own good deeds as discussed above. The process goes on to direct loving-kindness, peace, and joy derived from meditation to those closest to us, and then to those whom we know and other sentient beings whom we do not know, and finally to our enemy – those with whom we have difficulty. The more we learn to love ourselves and others, the greater is our mental capacity to endure hardship and to overcome suffering.

5. THE NATURE OF BUDDHIST PSYCHOTHERAPY

A classical example of how the Buddha helped to end suffering is offered by the episode of a young woman who came to see the Buddha with her dead baby in her embrace. She wept tearfully and implored the Buddha to revive her baby's life with his magic power. The Buddha pondered that even if he could perform the miracle, it could not benefit the woman spiritually in the way of ending her suffering. He decided to help her see the light of the truth, and sent her to visit families in town to see if any of them was spared the woe of infant mortality. She came back with the report that there was none. At this point, the Buddha began to lecture her on the impermanence of worldly affairs, getting across the point that her emotional attachments to life and rejection of death were at the root of her suffering, and that it was up to her to eradicate that root. Upon hearing the lecture, her mind was awakened and she went on to become an "arhat" – a Buddhist saint who has achieved liberation from the primordial ignorance and delusion, and thus from the vicious circle of life and death.

5.1. A Behaviorist Approach with Love

This case and many others serve to remind us that a combination of the behaviorist and the cognitive approaches to psychotherapy was practiced by the Buddha some 2600 years ago. To help people overcome grief, fear, anger, and hatred, he had them go through the process of "relearning" from the environments and the actual experience of life. The point is to make them understand that these negative feelings and emotions are largely self-inflicted out of ignorance of the truth of existence, and therefore they must take the responsibility to resolve their own emotional difficulties. In this case the cognitive capacity for a "right understanding" of the truth through actual experience is emphasized. A Buddhist analogy is given of a person who mistakes a coil of rope for a snake at twilight and becomes terrified. The only way to assuage his fear is to make him see the rope for what it really is (Keown, 1996, p. 68).

As far as Buddhist psychotherapy is concerned, the behaviorist-cognitive approach would not be complete without a third ingredient – love and compassion. As we have already seen, Buddhism considers love and compassion as the most effective antidote to all

negative emotions. The Buddha is often quoted as saying that “hatred can never be ceased by hatred; it is ceased by love alone.” And this truth applies to fear and anger as well.

The legend has it that the Buddha once sent a group of monks to meditate in a forest at night. As these monks were terrified by the tree spirits that came out to disturb their meditation, they begged their teacher to send them to a safer place. But the Buddha insisted that they go back to the same forest and meditate with loving-kindness for the tree spirits. It turned out that by following their teacher’s advice, they not only had their fear dispelled, but also so moved the tree spirits with their loving-kindness that the tree spirits vowed to serve the monks in all ways (Salzberg, 1997, p. 20). The implications of this story for psychotherapy is that the wise way to relate to fear is not to run away from it, but to face up to what is being feared with loving-kindness and to befriend it. Again, this Buddhist approach is similar to what behaviorist psychotherapy calls “systematic desensitization,” except that it puts emphasis on love as an antidote to fear.

Mahatma Gandhi provides yet another example of how it works. An Indian father was excessively grieved by the murder of his son at the hand of a Muslim. To relieve his grief and hatred, mainstream psychotherapy would have resorted to ego-oriented approaches such as “getting even” with the murderer or some form of catharsis therapy that seeks vicarious outlets for the pent-up emotions. But Gandhi chose a transpersonal approach and advised the father to adopt a Muslim orphan and treat him as his own son. By so doing the Indian father learned to overcome his grief, hatred, and animosity with the power of love that transcends personal limits, and this was done through the seemingly impossible experience of caring for the enemy combined with the cognitive capacity that affirms the inner strength of love and compassion as a means of self-transcendence. Without the actual experience of caring for the orphan, there would be no existential base on which the potentials of love can be developed; and yet without a transpersonal perspective to affirm and recognize the positive power of love, mere experience may not go very far. Such a behaviorist approach of overcoming hatred by love through actual experience is exactly what the Buddha emphatically prescribed and practiced.

This implies that Buddhist psychotherapy expands the cognitive capacity far beyond the realm of ego-psychology. The need for self-esteem, which mainstream psychology sees as an important factor in mental health, can lead into the blind alley of narcissism if the self-esteem in question is too much ego-oriented. By contrast, Buddhist psychotherapy encourages the use of one’s talents and skills in the service of others, thereby affirming a sense of self-worth and self-fulfillment which can have greater therapeutic effects than if the talents and skills are used to serve one’s own interests. Moreover, Buddhist psychology recognizes that an important source of self-esteem rests with the affirmation of one’s own transpersonal qualities such as loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, etc. Self-worth based on personal success and achievements can be a source of suffering, first because it is ego-oriented, and secondly because we so often meet with failures in our lives. On the other hand, self-worth based on love and other transpersonal qualities can bring greater happiness because it rises above the ego and is available to all of us at all times.

5.2. Buddhist Approach to Grief Counseling and Therapy

Like other religions, Buddhism offers effective grief therapy to people who suffer from the loss of loved ones, cancers and other kinds of personal misfortune. In these cases

a strong faith in Amitabha Buddha (the Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life), Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Goddess of Compassion, or Kuan Yin) or some other celestial Buddha/Bodhisattva (such as the Buddha of Medicine) is essential. Above all, the Pure Land School of Buddhism plays a vital role in helping devotees cope with grief and suffering. Through his compassionate vows and commitments to the salvation of sentient beings, Amitabha Buddha was experienced by ancient Buddhist sages as having created his Western Pure Land, where a devotee can have rebirth after death by virtue of pure faith, a strong will to be reborn there as well as persistent single-minded recitation of the sacred name of Amitabha Buddha.

Once spiritual communion with Lord Amitabha is established through faithful practice, the devotee feels secure about life and death. His fear of death and suffering of life are gone now that the promise of rebirth in the Pure Land is experienced and understood to be something real that will be honored by Lord Amitabha.

5.2.1. The Meaning of Infinite Life

While the Chinese Pure Land School emphasizes the ultimate goal of rebirth after death, Japanese Pure Land followers, many of them scholars with considerable intellectual breadth, appear more concerned about how the gospel of Pure Land can be brought to bear with the reality of this world. Faith in the Pure Land will be incomplete if the devotee is only concerned with what happens after death. After all, life and death cannot be seen as separate or antithetic to each other. So faith in the Pure Land should be able to help uncover the meaning of life and death, to see them as an integrated whole that signifies an infinite and eternal life that embraces all beings and is unaffected by the cycle of birth and death. The infinity of life also means that life and death are not simply a matter of the individuals seen as separate from one another, but a boundless cosmic network of interdependence that involves every one of us. If this new insight can be achieved, Pure Land is not just a vision for the future, but is with us here and now. The insight thus gained is not different from the insight gained through other Buddhist practices as we have discussed in the preceding sections of this chapter, except that it is the result of faith in Amitabha Buddha and His Pure Land – a devotional approach that distinguishes itself from other Buddhist schools.

Japanese scholar-monk Obata Bunsho points out that to appreciate the teachings of the Pure Land School, one needs to think about life in relation to death. In his view, those people who pursue the pleasure of life while pretending that death does not exist can never see the truth of life as expounded by the Pure Land School. The false perception of life as opposed to death is a source of suffering. Only when this opposition is transcended can one be reborn in the eternal bliss of the Pure Land. To develop such an insight, Obata has made many trips to India to experience the grim realities of life and death. The heart-rending scenes of corpses lying on Indian streets unattended by no one but flies, of dead bodies summarily cremated on the roadside, etc., serve as a vivid reminder of life's sufferings, and drive home a moral urgency to end the sufferings. He concludes that the only way out is to discover a "true new life" that is deeper and broader than the limited personal life, and the new life is possible only by "relying on the power of vows" of Amitabha Buddha. As he observes, "If we fail to be in touch with this power of vows, we are not really alive even if we have lived a hundred years. If we touch this power of vows, we obtain a true new life even though we have only ten or five more years to live" (Tashira, 1997, p. 126).

What distinguishes Buddhism from other religions is the Buddha's profound insight into the oneness of all beings living in an interrelated and interdependent universe. The Chinese Pure Land School seldom if ever expounds this cosmic truth, but Obata's discourse makes it clear that the understanding of Pure Land is not complete without taking the insight of a larger self into account. As he observes,

Life and death are not just the business of an individual. I need to explain this point again. People always say, "Death is my own business, and life is my own business." But the truth is that life and death go beyond our ego. We are in fact born and die in a much broader world. If we live and die all by ourselves, we fail to see how deep and broad life and death really are. As a result, we are unconcerned about others' lives, and we are unconcerned about their deaths also. We are not even concerned and critical about the death of modern society. If we cannot understand that our life and death are related to this broad world, and only live and die as an individual, then we plunge into the dark abyss of suffering, despair and loneliness. Therefore, it is imperative that we try to understand and show insight into the deep broad life that lies beyond our limited lives. I think this is the message I need to get across when I talk about rebirth in the Pure Land which is the teaching of Jodo Shinshu, True Pure Land School in Japan (Tashira, 1997, p. 128).

5.2.2. *How Pure Land Faith Helps Cancer Victims*

There are many cases in which cancer victims face pain and death calmly without fear and distress because they have developed faith in the Pure Land. Another Japanese monk, Wada Kosho, tells a story of how Pure Land faith had supported his daughter, Keiko, a cancer victim, and helped her to live her final years with complete dignity. An enlightening lesson we learn from this case is that the hope of rebirth in the Pure Land is not accompanied by a desire to abandon the painful body and the hopeless life. On the contrary, Keiko repeatedly wrote in her diary about how she appreciated her "good life" in spite of her fatal disease, and she encouraged her children to follow her example of "Buddha reciting" (repeated chanting of Amitabha Buddha's name) so that they could "meet again in the Pure Land." Religious faith is not just a spiritual opiate to soothe pain and distress; it is also a source of inner strength that enables the patient to face pain and distress with bravery and equanimity. Shortly before Keiko died, she wrote her father a New Year card, which read: "Peaceful time has gone by, so have sorrow and joy, and the good days that I so cherish. The coming New Year will be filled with the same joy, warmth and sorrow. How wonderful life is! With my heart filled with peace, I wish to extend to you, dear dad and mom, my heartfelt gratitude. I thank you for helping me to live out a beautiful and good life. Your dear daughter will be waiting for you in the Pure Land" (Tashira, 1997, pp. 28-29).

Venerable Wada concludes his discourse with the following message: "As Keiko's father, I can accept her death with calm and equanimity because my heart is full of fond hope that we will meet again soon in that world." And he adds that Keiko's wish to wait for dad and mom in the Pure Land was not empty words. "If someone says he will meet you at Nagoya Station, he must be there, otherwise it would be a lapse of courtesy. He who promises to meet you somewhere will certainly be there. My daughter promised to wait for us in the Pure Land, so she will be there. She is waiting in the Pure Land. This is a fact for

sure.” Buddhism believes that vows and will are self-fulfilling. And who is going to doubt that Venerable Wada and her daughter will meet again in the Pure Land?

6. THE POWER OF SURRENDER BY FAITH

There has been much debate as to whether Buddhist practice should rely on “self power” (i.e., the practitioner’s own efforts) or “other power” (spiritual empowerment by the Buddhas). Zen Buddhism is clearly based on “self power” in the sense that Zen practitioners relies on their own mental discipline to develop the potentials for enlightenment rather than praying the Buddhas for spiritual empowerment. On the other hand, the Pure Land School considers liberation to be a grace from Amitabha Buddha and devout praying to Amitabha Buddha with faith and trust is essential for salvation. Pure Land masters criticize Zen practitioners for unrealistically over-estimating the human capacity to achieve the supra-human goal of spiritual liberation. Conversely, the Pure Land practice is criticized for neglecting the mundane world and for its attachments to rebirth after death. A middle-of-the-road position argues that “other power” and “self power” complement each other, and that the former has to work through the latter. A similar debate can also be found in Christian circles as to whether salvation depends on grace alone, good work alone or a combination of both.

From the perspective of religious psychology, a crucial point is often missing in these arguments: The essence of the “other power” approach consists in the total surrendering of the practitioner to that power. The emphasis on “other power” should not be taken to mean that “self-power” is not important. Rather, it should be understood as a convenient way to let go of the ego through faith in the divine power of Amitabha Buddha. When Pure Land masters warn against the use of “self power” to achieve enlightenment, they are in effect warning against the possibility that the self-righteous egoistic tendencies associated with “self power” can compromise the ability of the practitioner to surrender himself.

The reactive pattern of craving and aversion that we have discussed above is a primary hindrance to all spiritual progress. Even our inner striving for progress, for making a difference from what we are, is part of that mechanism, and is therefore, paradoxically, an obstacle to progress. The ability to surrender in spiritual practice means the ability to let go of that reactive pattern. In the Pure Land practice, as in other spiritual traditions, salvation through faith is achieved only when the faith and trust in the divine power inspire the practitioner to surrender himself or herself totally, to give up his or her craving for gains and fear of losses, and to be free from all egoistic tendencies. If one can surrender oneself this way, life poses no problems at all, and one is always grateful for whatever happens, be it bad health or bad fortune. In many cases, surrendering, coupled with faith and trust in the divine power, brings about a miraculous cure of illnesses.* The Pure Land practice of surrender by faith is similar to evangelical Christians’ belief in salvation through total surrender to Christ. In both cases, spiritual transformation or regeneration is made possible by grace through faith and surrender.

* The Chinese Pure Land School does not seem to pay attention to the psychological principle of surrendering. William James, however, presents an insightful discussion of how Christianity and the mind-cure movement in the West attached importance to surrendering as a means to salvation. See Lectures IV and V on mind-cure movement in James’ well-known work *Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Modern Library, 1994.

A Buddhist case of surrender by faith is offered by a Japanese college teacher named Kawamura Toshiko (Tashira, 1997, pp. 70-71). She testified how surrender through Pure Land faith helped her to overcome sufferings from stomach cancer and intestine cancer. She said, "I entrusted everything to Lord Amitabha Buddha as I was faced with the painful moment of truth for the first time in my life. When I genuinely surrendered my life and death to Lord Amitabha Buddha, I experienced tremendous joy and happiness."

According to Master Shinran (1173-1262), founder of the True Pure Land School in Japan, Amitabha Buddha promises by His vow that "salvation is bound to come; just keep faith with your whole heart and rejoice in it." Kawamura's response to this vow and promise is: "Thank you! I surrender myself to you with my whole heart." (Tashira, 1997, p. 67) It sounds so simple! The simplicity of practice seems to befit the illiterate simple-minded country folks, and yet beneath the apparent simplicity there must be faith, wisdom and love that make genuine surrendering of one's life and death possible.

7. CONCLUSION

Suffering in the Buddhist sense is rooted in man's primordial ignorance and delusion that gives rise to the reactive psychological mechanism of clinging and rejecting, craving and aversion. This mechanism covers a whole range of mental defilements and negativities, such as greed, craving, hatred, anger, animosity, fear, jealousy, etc., which Buddhism sees as depriving a human being of his inner freedom and mental well-being. Thus in dealing with suffering, Buddhism does not simply aim at relieving suffering to make people feel better, but more importantly, at freeing the mind from the bondage of delusion and the conditioning of blind impulses. To end suffering is equivalent to breaking through the bondage of delusion and the conditioning mechanism so that one can become the master of his own mind and affirm the meaning of his existence marked by mental serenity, joy, love and compassion. This ultimate concern of human existence is now recognized by transpersonal psychology and existential psychology in the West.

A convenient approach to ending suffering is through faith in the Pure Land. The goal of the Pure Land practice is not only rebirth in the paradise after death, but rather to create a "pure land" in the heart and mind, a "pure land" out of the impure mundane world just as a pure lotus rises out of the dirty mud. The Pure Land faith should help the practitioner to gain a new insight that his or her life runs deeper and broader than he or she has known – an infinite life that transcends our ego consciousness of life and death. Embracing this infinity enables the practitioner to take life's pain and suffering in stride.

Furthermore, the secret of the Pure Land faith, like other spiritual traditions, lies in the readiness to surrender oneself to the divine power of Amitabha Buddha. Surrendering implies first and foremost the letting go of the reactive pattern of craving for gains and fear of losses, along with all egoistic and narcissistic tendencies. The ability to surrender oneself in this way is the key to spiritual salvation, and the process of surrendering is facilitated by faith and trust in "other power" (the divine power of Amitabha Buddha). With surrendering, one is able to see that life poses no problems even in the face of extreme difficulties. In many cases, surrendering helps cure or alleviate pain, suffering and physical illnesses. But again, the Pure Land faith is ultimately concerned not with the temporary relief of pain and suffering, but with spiritual liberation and salvation as we have discussed above.

The Buddhist approach to coping can be regarded as transformational or transformative coping (Wong, Wong & Scott, Chapter 1), because the focus is on personal transformation through mental self-discipline and/or surrender to a higher power. The resulting transformation extends far beyond cognitive reframing or cognitive restructuring, because it permeates one's basic values, attitudes and worldviews. It can be a powerful approach to coping if one is prepared to undertake the necessary moral and mental disciplines, even if only in connection with a course on Buddhist meditation. Many stressors automatically disappear as one embarks on the process of mental purification. It needs to be re-emphasized, however, that while in this Buddhist approach coping with suffering is a legitimate goal for reasons we have elaborated in this chapter, coping with daily stress is not necessarily so, unless we are prepared to address the issue of stress on the same philosophical footing as Buddhism addresses *dukkha* (suffering). A Buddhist meditation teacher would decline to accept students who are solely motivated by a desire to reduce stress and enhance well-being, for the simple reason that the goal of liberation requires a strong commitment and determination to change one's basic values and attitudes, and that a desire for gains is regarded as a hindrance to progress on the path leading to spiritual liberation. Ideally, the Buddhist approach to coping with suffering is an end in itself rather than a means to curing and healing, which is considered only as a by-product. Although one can simply employ some aspects of the Buddhist approach, such as mindful meditation, as a way of coping with stress, it is essential to remember that effective coping in this context embraces the Buddhist values and attitudes. In the process, one's life can be transformed and enriched by exploring the integration between coping efforts and the spiritual insights of Buddhism.

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