

*This is a slightly amended version of the handout for my workshop at the TA World Conference in Edinburgh, July 2005. I welcome all and any feedback on my remarks here. I believe that the interrelationship between TA and Buddhism is a very rich one. Here I have only touched on a few issues.*

## **Buddhism and Psychotherapy: Two Approaches to Mental Well-Being**

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“While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes... If while washing the dishes, we think only of the cup of tea that awaits us, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way as if they were a nuisance, then we are not “washing the dishes to wash the dishes.” What’s more, we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can’t wash the dishes, the chances are we won’t be able to drink our tea either, we will only be thinking of other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future—and we are utterly incapable of living one minute of life.” (Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, 3-5)

*Workshop participants were invited to undertake a 'simulated washing up' exercise in order to undertake a practical exploration of Thich Nhat Hanh's remarks.*

### **Skilfulness**

Tenzin Gyatso says of training the mind that “[generally] speaking, one begins by identifying those factors which lead to happiness and those factors that lead to suffering. Having done this, one then sets about gradually eliminating those factors which leads to suffering and cultivating those that lead to happiness” (*The Art of Happiness*, 4). This simple statement captures what seems to be central core of the Buddhist approach: skilful action. Skilful action is action that leads to less suffering.

For example, we can “[frame] any decision we face by asking ourselves, ‘Will it bring me happiness?’ This simple question can be a powerful tool in helping us skilfully conduct all areas of our lives, not just in the decision whether to indulge in drugs or that third piece of banana pie... With this perspective it’s easier to make the ‘right decision’ because we are acting to give ourselves something, not denying or withholding something from ourselves.” (Tenzin Gyatso, *The Art of Happiness*, 24).

Acting skilfully is not about ‘being perfect’. Skilful action does not contrast here with, say, decently competent action, i.e. as if skilful was at the very top of the range of competency. Rather skilful action contrasts with ‘clumsy’ or ‘cack-handed’ action.

The message of skilful action is lost if we are inclined to become ‘psychological weight-lifters’ obsessing about achieving the most skilful outcome possible. Such a lack of compassion towards ourselves is unskilful. Becoming skilful in the psychological sphere is like becoming skilful in any other sphere. It involves trial and error, practice, reflection, concentration, etc. It does involve self-discipline, but need not involving shaming by the self or by others. **Consider:** it is difficult to see how shaming the self and others, as opposed to learning from mistakes, could be skilful. However shaming might seem like a valuable shortcut for a trainer in a hurry.

**Note:** The idea of skilful action encourages empirical inquiry: find out what works and do more of it; find out what does not work and do less of it. Background assumptions include: (a) people are flexible and can change; (b) happiness is a goal; (c) it’s OK (indeed, correct) to start with the me and then move outwards.

**For details of my practice and other links go to: [www.extra-help.org.uk](http://www.extra-help.org.uk)**

## Four Noble Truths

1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering is caused by craving. (Attachment.)
3. Suffering can have an end. (We can stop craving. Non-attachment.)
4. There is a path which leads to the end of suffering. (Enlightenment.)

These are expressed in different ways by different authors. I have drawn on Keown, *Buddhism*, 45.

## Goals

Buddhism entertains a rather grand and bold idea (enlightenment, a complete cessation of suffering) wrapped closely up with a more practical and down to earth approach to mental well-being. This is more central to some Buddhist approaches than it is to others.

In TA there is also a rather grand and bold idea (script free living; complete autonomy), though perhaps not as grand and bold as enlightenment, that is seen as the idealised endpoint of engagement in the method.

In both cases progress towards the 'idealised goal' is valuable in itself. In some Buddhist approaches, the the more practical task of skilful action and enhancing mental-well being is very closely tied to the more radical search for enlightenment. **Personal note:** I have found this distracting. As best I understand it, Buddhist enlightenment is not a goal I want to work towards. Nor do I see it as the obvious, or only endpoint of the pursuit of happiness through skilful action.

Buddhism tends to emphasise developing high levels of self-management. A person works towards being fully compassionate towards themselves, to being mindful, to being capable of being calm and centred even in demanding situations. This work is not just through reflection, planning, and action. It also involves cultivating different mental states through meditation and working with the body, e.g. right breathing. Work on the self then has a positive impact on others. The effect on others is, as it were, a natural side-effect of the work on the self.

The Buddhist approach to politics seems to exemplify this. My take is roughly this: skilful action in the political arena requires what to a non-Buddhist frame of reference can seem to be extraordinary levels of patience. Fighting or engaging in shaming (I'm OK-you're not OK) might appear to be shortcuts to better outcomes. This, however, is a mistaken view. It is not the case that you can do better or more than seek happiness for yourself and others, to maintain an open and curious mind, to be compassionate towards your 'enemies'. This might not seem enough. But it only would not be enough if other approaches really did lead to better outcomes.

**Note:** the Buddhist approach does not preclude clearly expressing moral views, e.g. vegetarianism. However, unlike most moral traditions, Buddhism does not (typically) seek to assert its moral authority through shaming/condemnation of transgressors. This can make it seem mild and morally uncommitted. In fact, it can take a great deal of commitment to refrain from shaming/condemnation. The Buddhist line would be that such refraining is an example of skilful action.

TA also emphasises self-management. However, it also has a strong focus on relationships, e.g. through its emphasis on analysing transactions through the theory of games, and the commitment to contracts.

- TA is typically presented as an intervention strategy (one form of the medical model) rather than a life philosophy.
- TA is close to morally neutral, although there is a clear exception in the commitment to unconditional OK-ness of the self and others. TA can struggle to accommodate other moral norms; there can be a tendency to place very firm moral norms in Parent. It is possible to see TA as (merely?) a tool for achieving life goals (including moral goals), where these goals are set external to the system of TA. TA helps the individual when she is having difficult effectively

pursuing these goals. **Note:** on the moral neutrality / moral substance continuum TA might sit between Buddhism (fairly substantive) and NLP (neutral).

### Transactional Analysis and Buddhist Psychology

| TA   | Buddhism  |
|--|---|
| People are OK  | Attitude of compassion. It is skilful to be compassionate towards yourself (I'm OK) and towards others (You're OK).   |
| Everyone has the capacity to think / individual's responsibility to decide what he/she wants from life   | Path to well-being is achieved through mental training. This includes meditation, breath techniques etc. and not just reflection and practical action. Standing (if tacit) assumption that as human being we are capable of engaging in such training successfully.   |
| Decisional model: People decide their own destiny, and these decisions can be changed  | Shares (more or less) the view that defences are 'attempts' (usually outdated / unskilful) to 'avoid suffering'. Unlike TA, Buddhism is not strongly committed to active agency in establishing defences. It is clearly committed to possibility of change.   |
| Contractual Method / Joint Responsibility  | SG advised that "each person should think for himself on matters of doctrine, cross-referencing views and opinions against the scriptures before deciding whether to accept them" (Damien Keown, Buddhism, 27).   |
| Open communication / non-technical language  | No general commitment. Some authors insist that subtleties of certain Sanskrit/Pali terms are mission critical. Other authors are far more relaxed.   |
| Emphasises engagement with here-and-now reality as opposed to perception and cognition coloured by past-encounters / defence mechanisms.   | Much common ground here, but some Buddhism approaches appear more radical, e.g. often argued that much of our perception and cognition is seriously deluded, e.g. there is no self, it is an illusion. Occasionally seems to take pleasure in (and be attached to) iconoclasm. Concern about distorted perception and cognition often mixed in with what, to my ear, sound like anti-Western and/or anti-science rhetoric as well as shaky metaphysics. |
| No (or highly optional) religious / supernatural commitments   | Usually clear religious and supernatural commitments. However, Tenzin Gyatso and others promote Buddhist attitude to well-being on its own merits independently of religious / supernatural commitments.  |
| Idealised goal is autonomy (awareness, spontaneity, intimacy) and script-free living.  | Idealised goal is enlightenment – a radical release from suffering. But note also Tenzin Gyatso's remark: 'I believe that the purpose of our life is to seek happiness'   |
| Hungers – acknowledges hungers, e.g. stimulus hunger, stroke hunger, etc. as non-negotiable features of human existence and seeks to find ways in which they can be effectively met. Acknowledges that script etc. often involves highly ineffective / counterproductive strategies for meeting basic needs. | Argues that our perception of what are non-negotiable hungers is often distorted. We are attached to what we perceive as essential needs. By breaking that attachment, we relieve the suffering that a failure to meet the perceived needs generates. Skilful action is to give up attachments rather than become more efficient at meeting 'bogus' needs.  |

## Buddhist Psychology

Buddhism sees suffering as a product of what TA would call our 'frame of reference'. We can release ourselves from suffering by shifting our frame of reference. Some shifts are easier to make than others. The role of physical techniques in achieving such shifts, e.g. right breathing, and meditation are fairly central in the Buddhist approach. (They are fully compatible with TA approach but are not 'built-in' in the way they are 'built-in' to Buddhism.) Like TA, Buddhism suggests that there are dynamic processes that perpetuate our frame of reference. These processes make shifts out of that frame difficult. For example, evidence that might challenge a deeply held assumption, may be reinterpreted.

One thread in Buddhist psychology involves a fivefold division of the process of how we relate to reality: the five aggregates of grasping. Each aspect involves a distortion and each aspect supports the others. The terms used here have a built-in value, i.e. like the phrase 'distorted view'. The Buddha urges his disciples to give up these five ways of grasping.

- rupa – roughly, how the world looks to us (conditioned through our frame of reference)
- vedana – roughly, how the world feels to us: an immediate gut reaction (somatic)
- samjna – roughly, what we conclude about the world, conditioned by past
- samskara – roughly, self-perpetuating repetitive patterns of thought or behaviour
- vijnana – roughly, how we see our self (I'm the kind of person who always... etc.)

"Buddhist psychology presents models which suggest that what we perceive conditions how we react. How we react conditions the kind of mental structures we carry. The mental structures we carry then conditions how we approach life. How we approach life then conditions what we perceive. This pattern is a loop that reinforces itself constantly. *Each of us continually seeks affirmation that we are that person who we have assumed ourselves to be. Situations that disturb this process are avoided or reinterpreted, and the self appears to become more substantial.*" (Brazier, *Buddhist Psychology*, 93; my emphasis.)

The link between the five aggregate model and the TA ideas of script, discounting, reframing, rackets, etc. are clear. Some Buddhist authors, including Brazier quoted just here, seem to suggest that our key aim is to remove all self-oriented elements into our engagement with how the world looks, feels, and is, and what we do and who we think we are. Of course, it is skilful to reject distorted perception. And it is skilful to reject a limited view of the self: a view that discounts our actual capabilities. The more radical demand to remove all trace of self from our engagement with the world and ourselves is challenging.

**Personal note:** I am not entirely clear what is being asked and also quite why it is being asked. Taking skilful action as a touchstone, what I do understand is the importance of constant vigilance with respect to potential distortion of perception of the way the world is and of our own capacities to act and be within it. Building a strong and flexible self, e.g. one committed to skilful action, seems to me to be a good thing. And engaging in the world at all seems to me to require some frame of reference or other. So virtue would seem to be a willingness to adjust that frame and openness to explore switching from frame to frame, rather than dispense with all and every frame altogether.

*At the end of the workshop participants took part in a mediation exercise based on **Basic Breath Meditation Instructions** and **A Guided Meditation** by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. For source material please see: [www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org).*

## Diagnosis Exercises

One of the exercises in the workshop involved small groups exploring a TA diagnosis of a case studies. Half the small groups worked on Case A and half on Case B.

### Case A

Client SG, around 20 years old, presents with mild anxiety. He feels unsatisfied with his life and says “it lacks meaning”. He lives in a gated community in exceptionally comfortable surroundings. His mother died when he was just seven days old. He has been brought up by his father and his aunt (mother’s sister), who has subsequently married his father. His father is very protective and has taken every step to shield SG from pain and suffering, while at the same time providing him with every imaginable luxury. SG has no contact with the wider world, only with family, employees, or close associates of his father. Although he is recently married and has a young son, SG makes almost no mention of his new family.

- Based on the above (limited) information what (tentative) diagnosis might you make of SG using the concepts of Transactional Analysis? Consider, for example, script matrix, life position, drivers, and process script.

### Case B

Client SG, around 25 years old, approaches you for “spiritual advice”. After a highly cosseted upbringing he tells a story of a clandestine trip outside of the gated community in which he had spent his life. Incredible as it may seem, he tells you, he encountered for the first time in his life people who were aged and infirm, people who were sick, and the corpse of a person who had died. SG was deeply shocked and almost overwhelmed by these sights which were so at odds with the world he had grown up in. Outside the gated community he also encountered a travelling ‘holy man’. SG hoped the holy man would help him come to terms with his new found understanding of the reality of the human conditions. But SG was disappointed in the holy man’s offerings. Since then he has studied with a whole series of religious and spiritual groups. He has also mastered meditation techniques and engaged in extreme austerity. However, none of these encounters have satisfied SG. He approaches you on the same quest, asking whether you can help him make sense of and come to terms with the reality of the human condition as he understands it.

- Based on the above (limited) information what (tentative) diagnosis might you make of SG using the concepts of Transactional Analysis? Consider, for example, script matrix, racket system, life position, drivers, process script.