

## **Double bind**

Schizophrenia can be viewed as being of two kinds: the psychological and the religious. The psychological form is the more familiar one, the one treatable with modern psychiatry. It is religious schizophrenia that is trickier as the symptoms are not so clear and, ironically, might be regarded as religious virtue.

This is another way of talking about the two kinds of diseases the Buddha speaks of in **the Dve Roga Sutta** (A 4.157). Here the Buddha declares that we can claim to be healthy, even for all of our lives, “but, bhikshus, not easy it is to find those beings in this world who can claim to be mentally healthy for even a moment,” except for a fully awakened saint, an arhat.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the Vibhanga Commentary even declares, “The ordinary person is like one mad!” (VbhA 186). Why are we mad, or what are we mad with? We are afflicted by greed, hate and delusion. We are ever burning with these 3 fires that are the roots of suffering.<sup>2</sup>

Deep within us lurks the monster of greed so that we do not know when to stop wanting and measuring people and things. The monster of hate pulls our strings of anger and ill will, so that we see only the bad sides of ourselves and others. **The monster of delusion** is the trickiest, because we do not even know it is there: this is our views and how we think of ourselves and others.

C G Jung, a Buddhist-inspired psychologist, echoed the Buddha’s sentiments with his quip: “Show me a sane man and I will cure him for you.”<sup>3</sup>

The negative roots of motivation (greed, hate and delusion) make us want everything both ways: we want to eat the cake and keep it. This is a double bind. Often, we compare ourselves with others, seeing them as being “better” than us, or “inferior” to us, or “equal” to us.

Of those we measure as being “better” than us, we tend to want what we think they “have.” Of those we perceive as being “inferior” to us, we tend to treat them condescendingly, we look down on them. Of those we see as our “equal,” we tend to patronize them, treat them more casually, even playfully. Such attitudes can occur in anyone of us towards others, whether we are lay persons or monastics, or they are lay or monastic.

In other words, we see a “lack” in ourselves by seeing a “have” in others. We thingify what we see as missing in us or present in others. This is another double bind, because when we think we have got what we want, it usually turns out to be unsatisfactory after all! Apparently, the fun is in the chase, not the catch.

So we keep looking, hunting, and shopping around for what we feel is *missing* in us, and measuring what we think we *have* with those of others by way of gains, honour, status and power. To see thing in this way means to see a duality: to measure between an “I” and an “other.” The “I” will decide whether we have or have not, and whether the “other” has or has not.<sup>4</sup>

The paradox of the double bind simply haunts us all, all our lives, if we keep seeing double, so to speak. The paradox of Epimenides<sup>5</sup> is illustrative here. He famously declares “All Cretans are liars,” but since he is himself from Crete, he is lying, too, so.... This is like saying, “This sentence is false.” All this sounds humorous and light, but when this happens in real life, things get much darker.

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<sup>1</sup> A 4.157/2:142 = SD 42.16: see: [link](#).

<sup>2</sup> See **Anatta Lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59), SD 1.2: [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> Jolande Jacobi’s interview with Jung, 24 Nov 1963, reported in Vincent Brome, *Jung*, 1978: ch 23 n1. See <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/07/08/sane-cure/>.

<sup>4</sup> See “**Me**”: **The nature of conceit**, SD 19.2a: [link](#).

<sup>5</sup> Epimenides of Knossos (Crete) was a semi-mythical 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> cent BCE Greek seer and philosopher-poet.

If we think that it's all right to lie if the effect is good or keeps the status quo (a belief that is more common than we think), then if someone tells the truth about this, it would sound like, "I'm telling the truth that I'm lying!" What do we make of this then?

Bateson and his colleagues mention this interesting case of double bind in a domestic situation. A mother who cannot accept her hostile feelings towards her child, denies the situation by being super-sweet to the child. Now, if the child accepts the real message (the metacommunication) that the mother has hostile feelings, the mother will scold the child for "being bad" because she cannot accept the truth. On the other hand, if the child accepts the pretended love as if it were real, and responds with affection, the mother becomes anxious, and reproaches the child as "behaving stupidly."

This kind of child is in danger of developing schizophrenia as the only possible solution in such a paradoxical situation. Bateson and colleagues compared this to the situation of a Zen novice whose master threatens him with a stick, saying, "If you say this stick is real, I will hit you with it. If you say it's not real, I will hit you with it. If you don't say anything, I will hit you with it." The student, if he's wise or desperate, would take the stick away, or even hit the teacher with it!<sup>6</sup>

Most of us however, would be terrified if we are in the Zen novice's situation. We would probably flee into isolation, or simply offer a donation, which might or might not spare the rod.

In real life, such double binds are less subtle but more real. And they tend to be a vicious circle, where attempts to solve a problem becomes part of the problem. Take the example of someone who fails in love and so becomes a misogynist (hating marriage) and misanthrope (hating people in general), and gives up on love altogether). So he becomes a cold and distant person, always blaming others, except himself, for whatever has gone wrong with himself.

Suppose he decides to become a Buddhist, or a monk or a nun. People might see his quiet and reticence as religious calm, his emotional distance as detachment and, understandably, he would speak against marriage and any kind of social or sexual relations as being "unwholesome" or "evil." Believers might be impressed. This is a kind of co-dependence (where a person is controlled or manipulated by the mental pathology of another).

Watzlawick and his colleagues give a case in point, where an attempt to solve the problem becomes the problem itself. Take the case of a newly wedded couple who were treated like children by the parents-in-law. The harder the young couple tried to convince their parents that they were mature and perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, the more stubbornly the parents treated them as helpless children.

Family therapists then gave the couple the paradoxical task of acting as childishly as possible towards their parents (as a metachange). As a result, the parents were soon fed up with the couple, and scolded them for acting like little children instead of being responsible adults. Things then began to get better.<sup>7</sup>

These are a few examples of how our attempts at solving a problem become the problem or a part of it.<sup>8</sup> How do we avoid such a double bind? The first thing is to understand and accept the fact that such problems are based on views (whether right or wrong): we tend to judge people, instead of understanding and accepting them as they are (just as the Buddha does).

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory Bateson et al, "Towards a Theory of Schizophrenia," *Behavioral Science* 1, 1956:254. The story has been slightly modified.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland & Richard Fisch, *Change*, NY: W W Norton, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Technically, this is said to be "iatrogenic," said of a healer (eg a doctor or counsellor) who harms more than he heals on account of his efforts.

In fact, this is what the first noble truth is about: we have to know the problem and accept it. Then we examine the cause, which invariably lies in how we think. We tend to think in terms of greed, hate and delusion. Then we are fired with finding faults with those who are different from us or we see as being different from us.

We could say that, ironically, “solving” the problem does not really help here, because the roots of the problem – greed, hate and delusion – are always there within us (as long as we are unawakened). The best, even only, cure is to work at the roots, that is, to uproot at least greed (by practising charity) and hate (by practising lovingkindness). Delusion, being very tricky and shadowy, needs more work, but is generally weakened if we are able to remove, or at least, lessen greed and hate.

The point is simple enough: the people we see as troubling us are really symptoms of our own weakness and perceived lack. We are seeing duality, we have double vision. We see in terms of “I” and “you,” instead of “we.” The more we see ourselves as “we,” the happier we will be.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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