

Psychotherapy and Buddhism

Source: (Aṭṭhaka) Khaluṅka Sutta (A 8.14), SD 7.9 (1.3.2)

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1.3.2.1 Jeffrey B Rubin, in his book, *Psychotherapy and Buddhism: Toward an integration*, in a section with the heading, “What psychoanalysis offers Buddhism,” writes:

“My experience as a psychoanalyst and meditator convinces me that Buddhist explanations of resistance [to meditation] provide a necessary but incomplete account of what interferes with meditation practice. The problem, I believe, is this: Interferences to meditation are acknowledged although not fully clarified in Buddhism.

A classical Buddhist text dealing with eight ways people relate to frustration is illustrative. In 'eight recalcitrant men and their eight defects' (Johansson, 1983, p 19), several defensive processes, eg, forgetfulness, aggression, projection, denial, and withdrawal are described but not explained. Why people utilize these strategies is not clarified and remains a mystery." (1996:134 f)

1.3.2.2 Chapter 4 of Rubin’s book, entitled “The emperor of enlightenment may have no clothes” (1996:83-96) is a succinct and sincere update on the western Buddhist approach to meditation specific-ally, and Buddhism generally. Essentially, he reminds us of the dangers of taking Buddhist teachers by way of their status as “enlightened teachers,” which in the 1990s has led to profound sufferings and embarrassments for the Buddhists of north America with the sexual and financial scandals involving Vajrayana gurus and Zen senseis.

This reminder is worth echoing in their graphic details to show that the Emperors of Enlightenment” are indeed naked and horny, and that we should be ashamed of the fact, and clothe ourselves appropriately before gurus; above all, to place the teaching above teachers.

Rubin also discusses the difficulties that psychologists and professionals face when they teach meditation. The impression I get is that he thinks that traditional Buddhist teachers are not really effective teachers since they do not know or understand. He seems confident that psychology has or will have the solutions that haunt meditation, including our “resistance” to it (I guess this refers to the mental hindrances: sense-desires, ill will, restless and worry, sloth and torpor, doubt: see SD 32.1).

The uncertain tone of my notes here is not my doubting Rubin (I have no good reason to), but because I am neither a psychologist nor a professional meditation teacher (one who sees Buddhism or meditation as a profession or lineage status). Outside of early Buddhism (an amateur or love-moved dedication to the historical Buddha and his teachings), his book contains some of the most commonsensical observations and valuable advice in any such book. They should be studied, discussed and heeded so that we do not make the same mistakes again, or any, for that matter, in connection with meditation and Buddhism.

1.3.2.3 Having said that, I do not envy the position of the psychologist or the professional. One simple reason is that in any academic and self-propelled profession of meditation,

Buddhism has a shelf-life and an almost predictable trajectory. They start with childlike wonder for Buddhism and meditation; they court it with adolescent vigour; they harvest the wealth and wisdom of their field in unequal measures; the marriage then fails (“I’m not a Buddhist”); they have to turn to some promising diversions as the sun sets on their lives.

Like all academic fields before psychology, it is itself an evolving discipline (is it now a science or an academic antarabhava). The point is that it is still growing. So, whatever we say now about it is here-and-now at best. There was a time when many adored Freud, but more do not now. We remember and utter the names of some famous psychologists or strange mind-healing names, but most only blossom unheard in the academic desert. New names are the tsunamis in the next generations. The paths of psychology lead but to the home, if mercifully dementia does not blur the once brilliant minds.

The Buddha’s teaching, as a rule, primes us away from the comforts of home, to live independent lives in the space of the heart. The truth-language of early Buddhism has always been the same: it may not fully clarify why there is resistance to meditation, but when we love and live Buddhism as it is, early and true, then, we see for ourself what no tongue of man nor angel can speak of; only our heart knows its own joy while the stranger only stands afar a-wondering.

1.3.3 From what we have discussed—both on the nature of defence mechanisms themselves [1.2.1] and the cases of the reactions of the offending monks [3.7.2.2]—we must understand that neither the (Aṭṭhaka) Khaluṅka Sutta (A 8.14) nor Buddhist psychology is about defence mechanisms. The (Aṭṭhaka) Khaluṅka Sutta is about the faults of a monastic when he is questioned in matters of the Dharma or the Vinaya before the sangha; that he should be amenable to instruction on account of his having requested the tutelage (nissaya) as part of his ordination procedure.

As interestingly as Buddhist psychology may describe or explain how an offender thinks, whether they are actually “defence mechanisms” or not, is not an issue at all in Dharma training. The purpose of Buddhist psychology is that of knowing, shaping and freeing the mind so that we are able to attain mindfulness, if not dhyana, for the sake of gaining deep insight into true reality leading to the path of awakening.

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

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