BUDDHIST AND WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY: SOME COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Daniel Goleman
Boulder, Colorado

The question the conference poses to us is "What is sanity?" I suppose that particular question became most emblazoned in my own mind because of an incident that occurred to me in the late sixties while I was still a student at Harvard. A few years before there had been a scandal over their drug research, and Richard Alpert and Timothy Leary had been kicked out of the department, the very program in which I had become a student. In the intervening years Alpert had gone to India and become Ram Dass (1971). It happened that one of the first talks he gave on returning to the States was at Harvard, at the Graduate Student Colloquium, and most people went there out of curiosity-what had happened to this person? The talk, I remember, began at 7:00 in the evening and lasted until 3:00 in the morning and hardly anyone left. To a group of people who had been nurtured in the tradition of Western psychology, he presented viewpoints from the East and talked about states of consciousness and human possibilities that were nowhere to be found in our own psychologies-it was fascinating. The next day I was at lunch with one of my clinical professors. He had not been there the evening before. He wanted to know what Alpert (now Ram Dass) was talking about-what did he say? Very much in the style of a clinical supervision I gave my account of what he said, and he listened carefully and asked well-chosen questions. Then, after listening for a while he looked at me, leaned across the table and in a confidential tone he said, "Tell me, is he psychotic?"

*Keynote address from, "What is Sanity? Concepts of Mental Health in Buddhist and Western Psychology." Sponsored by the Blaisdell Institute. Claremont, California, June 12-14, 1981 and funded by a grant from the California Council for the Humanities. Co-sponsored by the Association for Transpersonal Psychology and six other cooperating organizations. Publication of the proceedings is planned.
Abhidhamma

I looked back at this fellow whom I knew pretty well. He was a junior professor "on the make," and I knew that he would do just about anything necessary to his own grandmother to get tenure, so I looked back at him and I thought, "What is sanity?" That's how I've come to be here today.

The Buddhist psychology that I studied—not at Harvard, I assure you, but in Asia—is Abhidhamma. It dates back to the first five-to-ten centuries after Gautama Buddha and is the classical formulation of the workings of the mind and what one can do with them. It holds the same prominence in Buddhist thought that psychoanalytic thought holds in the Western therapeutic tradition. The Abhidhamma is the main tap root, and there are innumerable variations, just as in psychoanalysis. By the time, for example, one gets through Mahayana Buddhism into Tibetan Vajrayana, or to Chan Buddhism or Zen, there are very few recognizable commonalities, although if one searches, one can find them. So what I'm describing to you is not the only Buddhist psychology, but it is the classical Buddhist psychology.

Abhidhamma is a phenomenological system whose formulators were wonderfully obsessive chroniclers of the mind. They hold, as a basic unit of their psychology, what we could call a "mind-moment," a moment of awareness. It constitutes the flavor of consciousness at any given moment. However, distinct from that—and this is a crucial difference for Abhidhamma—is the object of awareness. The flavor of mind, the mind-moment, can vary and does vary from moment to moment in the stream of awareness, while the object it takes can remain constant. For example, you have to take out the garbage. That thought, taking out the garbage, might be a moment of awareness. You might feel angry: "Why me?, I hate to take out the garbage"; or resigned: you might feel, "Oh well, nobody else will do it, poor me, I'll take out the garbage"; or you might feel joy: "Oh my God, that garbage is just horrible, I'm so glad to be taking it out." What's happened is that the object of awareness has remained constant, but the properties of mind that regard it have changed. [If you have meditated, or if you introspect, or if you think about the situation at the moment, it doesn't take much to see that mind-moments vary, tremendously. For example, we maintain the illusion that I am talking and you are listening. But there have been studies done in lecture situations where the lecturer will say out of the blue, "What did I just say? Write it down, don't peek." Only about 20% of students know, at any given moment, what the professor has just said, because they have the luxury of sitting there and maintaining the illusion or the semblance of attentiveness. God knows what's going through
their minds—one succession of mind-moments after another. You could be having the most wonderful fantasies, and I would think you're really enjoying what I'm saying because of the smile on your face. So the array of mind-moments from moment-to-moment varies.

The formulators of *Abhidhamma* were quite precise in their observations. One system of *Abhidhamma* (Narada, 1968) says that there are fifty-three mental factors which dominate the mind from moment-to-moment. In any given moment a subset of these fifty-three will characterize the mind, and there will be a hierarchy—the most intense will be at the top of the hierarchy, and the least strong at the bottom. That list of mental factors constitutes the flavor of one's mind at that moment, and it will change in the next moment. From the point of view of what is sanity, what is mental health, there are two subsets of mental factors that are particularly important: one that is healthy, the other unhealthy. The unhealthy factors include, first and foremost, *delusion*, which is a perceptual factor. It's a cloudiness of mind that leads to a misperception of the object of awareness. You see, but you don't see properly—you misconstrue. Delusion, this misperception of the true nature of things, is the simple failure to see "clearly," without bias or prejudice of any kind. It's the core of all unhealthy mental states. If there's delusion, you're in trouble, from this point of view. Delusion, for example, leads to a second unhealthy factor, false view or *misdiscernment*. This entails placing something in the wrong category, and is a cognitive process. You misperceive, you misconstrue. Among the pernicious false views which the Buddha explicitly criticized is that there's a fixed self or ego—-the pervasive assumption in many Western personality theories. That, he said, was a false view; you haven't seen clearly enough. Another unhealthy mental factor is *perplexity*, the inability to decide or make a correct judgment. If you're perplexed, you're filled with doubt in the extreme, you can become paralyzed. Two other unhealthy factors are *shamelessness* and *remorselessness*. These factors only arise when the object of awareness is an evil act. For example, it's tax time: "Should I or should I not fudge a little?" Shamelessness and remorselessness arise and you think, "Yes, I'll fudge a little." These factors are prerequisites for mental states that underlie any act of ill-will. Another unhealthy factor is *egoism*. Self-interest causes one to view objects solely in terms of fulfilling one's own desires or needs. It's the "what's in it for me" point of view. The rest of the unhealthy factors are primarily affective: *agitation* and *worry*, which are states of distractedness and rumination. These factors create a state of anxiety—the central feature of most mental disorder. Other factors tend to go together: *greed, aversion, avarice* and *envy*. 
They lead to a grasping attachment to the object of awareness. "I want it, I need it. Do I have my Master Charge with me?" That's greed, avarice, and envy. And finally, the last of the fourteen unhealthy factors are contraction and torpor, which lend a rigid inflexibility to mental states. When these factors predominate, your mind, as well as your body, is prone to sluggishness-you just can't get going. Insanity, from the Buddhist point of view, is the moment when anyone of these unhealthy factors predominates the mind.

The fourteen healthy factors stand in the relationship of reciprocal inhibition to the unhealthy ones. When the healthy factors are present, they inhibit the unhealthy factors-very much like Wolpe's desensitization therapy where relaxation replaces tension. These are seen as a corollary of a physiological opposition: It's a psychological opposition.

In the system of Abhidhamma the main healthy factor, as you might imagine, is insight, the opposite of delusion: a clear perception of the object as it really is-no attentional warps, no defensive maneuvers, no avoidance, no exaggeration-just the thing as it is. This is the primary and central healthy factor, and it is paired with mindfulness, which is the continued clear comprehension of the object. The opposites of shamelessness and remorselessness are modesty and discretion. Discretion says, "I'm in a tax bracket with a lot of deductions where I might be audited; I think the discreet thing to do is to tell the truth," for example. These two are connected in the mind with rectitude (another healthy factor), the attitude of correct judgment-seeing what to do and executing it. Closely linked to that is the factor of confidence, assuredness based on the correct perception: you know how to act, so you do it. The cluster of unhealthy factors-greed, aversion, avarice and envy-are opposed by the healthy factors of nonattachment, nonaversion, impartiality, and composure, which reflect the physical and mental tranquility that arise from diminishing feelings of attachment. These four factors-nonattachment, nonaversion, impartiality, and composure-replace a grasping and rejecting attitude with an even-mindedness toward whatever object may arise in the mind. Then, finally, the last four healthy factors are both mental and physical: buoyancy, pliancy, adaptability and proficiency. When these dominate your mind, you think and act with a natural looseness and ease, and you perform at your peak. These factors suppress the unhealthy factors of contraction and torpor which dominate the mind in depression. They help you to adapt, to do well, and to meet changing conditions.

When you have laid out in clear formulation the unhealthy and healthy factors, and then ask, What is sanity in Abhi-
Dhamma? the answer is very simple. It's the presence of healthy factors and the absence of unhealthy. It's very clear cut. Most of us, of course, much of the time have one or another unhealthy factor in our mind. This is why Buddha looked around and said, "Worldlings are deranged."

Now if the human condition is one of insanity, from this perspective, what can you do about it? Simply knowing that a state is unhealthy is insufficient. Let's say you're full of torpor, and you just can't get going. You think, "I hate being torporous. I would like to be flexible, buoyant, pliant and energetic." Now you've just added aversion and desire to the mix of your torpor. So what's the best strategy, what can you do? You "finesse" it. You neither explicitly reject unhealthy factors, or actively desire healthy factors. You do something which will, as a side affect, transform your psychological economy, and that something is meditation. Meditation is the means and the antidote, and the end is sanity.

Buddhist psychology assumes that, in order to become truly healthy, you have to transform the processes of consciousness. That's what meditation does from a cognitive psychological point of view. Generic meditation—suitable for everyday use—is simply the sustained attempt to re-train attention. Through a Western psychological lens, meditation is attentional retraining, a method that works with the fundamental processes of consciousness. Depending on exactly how you do it, meditations such as Transcendental Meditation or meditation on the breath would be categorized as one-pointedness techniques in the Buddhist perspective. That is to say, in one-pointed meditation the strategy is: "My contract with myself is to bring my mind back to my mantra or to my breath. Whenever my mind wanders and I realize that it wanders, I'll bring it back. For now, everything else, other than that one object of awareness, is irrelevant and a distraction." That's your contract. So you sit there and meditate, and you're watching your breath. It goes in and it goes out, it goes in and it goes out, and then you think, "I'm getting a little hungry. Gee, I wonder if there's any peanut butter. Oh yeah, I got some yesterday. I think I'll go make a peanut butter sandwich." You get up and make a peanut butter sandwich, a little honey, it's really good, a little milk. Then you remember: "Oh yeah, I'm meditating—bring the mind back to the breath." For most of us, most of the time, meditation is merely that process of remembering to remember.

In the higher reaches (and Buddhist psychology is very interested in the higher reaches of meditation), some other things begin to happen. According to Abhidhamma, if you get really proficient, sort of Olympic level, at one point you can enter an
actual altered state, which is called Jhana. Remember that these are obsessive and meticulous chroniclers of the mind. In the first Jhana-there are eight of them-they say that the dominant mental factors are the object of awareness, one-pointedness on that object, sustained attention to it, and feelings of rapture, bliss, and one-pointedness. The first Jhana is considered an altered state, and it’s supposed to be a terrific event. You notice if you’re in a Jhana because your mind has stopped except for that object. However, if you want to get really good, you come out of Jhana and then say, "Okay, fine, well and good, now go back into it, and when you get into it, give up the object of awareness." So in your mind there is just feelings of rapture, bliss, and one-pointedness which is the second Jhana. The name of the game is to refine the subtlety of the mind.

If you want to get into the third Jhana, you have to realize, "Well, compared to bliss, rapture is really pretty gross, so I think I’ll go back in and give up rapture -Pll just have bliss and one-pointedness." Good. Next Jhana. "Well, compared to one-pointedness and equanimity, bliss is really pretty gross, so I give that up." Then you get to the fourth level where mind is characterized mainly by equanimity and one-pointedness. You can get into higher and higher refinements and subtleties until in the eighth Jhana, you’re in a sphere which is called "the realm of neither-perception-nor-nonperception." Because of the fact that it is so subtle, you can’t say for sure it exists, but you can’t say for sure it doesn’t. It’s the extreme remove of the subtlety of awareness. Those are the Jhanas.

The progression that I’ve just described also seems to fit what in yogic traditions is called samadhi. Samadhi is an altered state you get into the same way and which has the same characteristics. But Buddha, in one of his great insights, felt that samadhi or one-pointedness techniques did not eradicate unhealthy factors. You could be a wonderful “blissed-out” yogi, but if somebody came along and bugged you, you would get angry; or if someone came along and turned you on, you would get lustful, and so on. So Buddha saw it as insufficient and said that what you want to do is use your power of concentration to follow a different path. That path is the path of insight or mindfulness.

Mindfulness meditation demands an entirely different strategy of attention. Instead of disregarding all the contents of your mind except one, you do the opposite and maintain a “witness awareness” of it all. You regard with even-mindedness everything that goes through your mind. You try to watch absolutely everything. If you can do that and do it well, you begin to see these discrete units, these very small chunks of conscious-
ness, and you begin to see that they’re always changing. Perceiving these units reveals three basic insights of Buddhism: (1) that everything is impermanent, and (2) that there’s no abiding self—that the illusion of your ‘self’ is the concatenation of these continually changing, always-in-flux, mind moments. There’s nobody there, nothing that can possibly be a source of lasting satisfaction. And because satisfaction always ends, you realize (3) that seeking and clinging to satisfactions is actually the source of suffering. So, ideally, these three cognitive insights emerge in mindfulness meditation.

As you continue noting these objects, you enter an altered state which I’ve called—apologies to Buddhist scholars—"pseudo-Nirvana," where things get really groovy. You have very clear perception, and the following may happen to you: you have a vision of a brilliant light; you have rapturous feelings; you feel tranquil; you feel devotional; you have great vigor in meditating; you have sublime happiness; you have quick and clear perception of every moment; strong-mindfulness and equanimity—except there is also attachment to these states.

Typically, the classical literature says the meditator will get into this state and then go to see his teacher and say, "I think I’m enlightened," or something to that effect. The teacher will investigate and question him and see exactly where he is and say, "Look, you’re just attached. Keep looking, note all of these things, the rapture, all of the wonderful things that are happening in that state, and then see what happens." So you go back and sit down on your cushion. You start noting all these wonderful things with detachment and they disappear. You go on the next stage in the progression and the three realizations of no-self, impermanence, and suffering hit you in a different way. As perception quickens, the ending of each moment of awareness is more clearly perceived than its arising. Then you perceive each moment only as it vanishes. The meditator experiences his contemplating mind and its objects as vanishing pairs in every moment. You have very clear perception, you can see just what’s happening, but you realize that your reality is in a constant state of dissolving, and a dreadful realization flows from this. Your mind becomes gripped with fear. All thoughts seem fearsome. You see becoming—that is, thoughts coming into being—as a source of terror, and you’re helpless to avoid that terror. At this point the meditator realizes the unsatisfactory quality of all phenomena. The slightest awareness he sees as utterly devoid of any possible satisfaction—there’s nothing but danger there. The meditator comes to feel that in all the kinds of becoming there’s not a single thing he can place his hopes in or hold on to. All awareness, every...
thought, every feeling appears insipid. This includes any state of the mind the meditator can conceive. Feeling this misery in all phenomena, the meditator becomes entirely disenchanted with them. Though he continues with the practice of insight, his mind is dominated by feelings of discontent and listlessness toward its own contents. Even the thoughts of the happiest sort of life or the most desirable objects seem unattractive and boring. He becomes absolutely dispassionate and adverse to the multitude of mental stuff, to any kind of becoming, destiny, or state of consciousness.

That is a crucial juncture in this progression, because with this utter detachment toward his own state of mind and every experience, the meditator is on the verge of a radical change in awareness. He plunges into a state which is called Nibanna in Pali, or Nirvana in Sanskrit—which is a technical term. It’s not the heaven realm, which is the loose way it's used in our culture. It is a state which is a non-state. It is the cessation of awareness. It has no phenomenology. It can only be described in terms of what it is not. There's nothing there. Awareness ceases. It's very different from the Jhanas, where something is still going on. It is, according to Abhidhamma, a cognitive shock of the deepest kind. It's a transformatory experience, and the transformation that follows is exactly what Abhidhamma posits as what one should seek. At its end point it's the complete eradication, at the deepest level, of the unhealthy factors from one's psychological economy. Now, the first glimpse of Nirvana does not do that, but as you perceive at deeper and deeper levels, different unhealthy factors drop out of your mind in succession. Literally, they do not occur, they do not arise. This is the transformation that's posited in Abhidhamma as the path to sanity.

One who has achieved this at the deepest level is called all Arhant, literally one worthy of praise. The personality traits of the Arhant in the literature describe quite an ideal sort of person. The ideal type includes the absence of the following: greed for sense desires; anxiety, resentment, or fears of any sort; dogmatism, such as the belief that this or that is "the truth"; aversion to conditions such as loss, disgrace, pain or blame; feelings of lust or anger; experiences of suffering; need for approval, pleasure, or praise; desire for anything for oneself beyond essential and necessary items. Those things are gone. On the other hand, there is a prevalence of the following: impartiality toward others; equanimity in all circumstances; an ongoing alertness; calm delight in experience (no matter how ordinary or even seemingly boring, an Arhan: is never bored-everything is absolutely fascinating because of the keen attention he has); strong feelings of compassion and
loving-kindness; quick and accurate perception; composure and skill in taking action; and finally, openness to others and responsivity to their needs. This responsivity to others’ needs was developed and taken as the focus for compassion in Mahayana Buddhism.

The Arhant represents a real paradigm challenge to Western psychology for two reasons. For one, he’s virtuous beyond belief. I mean, you tell anybody you know that you just heard about someone who’s just like the preceding and he’ll say, "Yeah, right, uh huh." In our culture and in our psychology we have nothing but skepticism for a radical transformation of consciousness of that sort. It overreaches our vision and the goals of Western psychologies and therapies. It's too good to be true. The Arhant lacks many characteristics that we assume to be intrinsic to human nature and which we in psychology take to be givens. But on the other hand, the Arhant is easily recognized in any great world religion. He's the prototypic saint, a prototype which is important and notable in Western psychology for its absence. Western religion still holds that possibility, but Western psychology never has. Buddhist psychology makes it explicit—that's the name of the game.

Having just described for you the vision, goal, and means of Buddhist psychology, let’s look at it from a Western point of view. Who in the West is even close, or can appreciate that kind of radical transformation? One of the people on the right track was WilHam James. In his textbook on psychology in 1910 he says in his chapter on attention, "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will. No one is compos sui if he have it not. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence." James saw the virtue of retraining attention, but he goes on to add, "It is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about." He wasn't familiar with Eastern attention training techniques. Although he was very familiar with mystical traditions (his father was a Swedenborgian) and wrote Varieties of Religious Experience, James didn’t have access to texts which describe these kinds of psychotechnologies. In fact, later in the chapter on attention he says, in effect, I've tried to hold my mind on one thought only, and I find it impossible to do so for more than a few moments.

That has been a weakness in Western cognitive psychology ever since. We resign ourselves to a certain degree, a large degree, of attentional spasticity. But from the Eastern point of view, attention is the one thing that one should work on cultivating and retraining.
What about lung? C. G. lung was certainly much more knowledgeable than James of Eastern traditions. He was highly informed, but lung, as you probably know, was harshly critical of Europeans who tried Eastern techniques for themselves. He wrote at one point, "People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls. They'll practice yoga and all its exercises, observe a strict regimen of diet, learn theosophy by heart, or mechanically repeat mystic texts from the literature of the whole world—all because they cannot get on with themselves and have not the slightest faith that anything useful could ever come out of their own souls." Jung saw the goals of Eastern psychology as laudable but the means as inappropriate to Westerners.

Freud rejected the whole thing out of hand. In his *Introduction to Civilization and its Discontents* he says, "I received a letter from one who calls himself my friend," and a footnote says it was Romaine Rolland, the French Nobel Laureate poet. Rolland was, at the time, in India studying with the saint named Sri Ramakrishna. Freud says, "This fellow describes feeling something limitless and unbounded." Freud thinks about it and says in effect, "This oceanic feeling is very interesting, but I've looked everywhere within myself and I've failed to find the least trace. He wrote, "The idea of men receiving an intimation of the connection of the world around them through a feeling which is from the outset directed to that purpose sounds so strange and fits in so badly with the fabric of our psychology that one is justified in attempting to discover a psychoanalytic explanation of such a feeling." The explanation, of course, was that a regression to the womb was the fountainhead of all spiritual experience.

James had a retort for Freud's dismissing spiritual states out of hand. Although James didn't have Freud in mind, he referred to the same intellectual bent when he wrote, "We're surely all familiar in a general way with this method of discrediting states of mind for which we have an antipathy. 'Medical materialism' seems, indeed, a good appellation for the simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up 81. Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs out St. Teresa as an hysterics, St. Francis of Assisi as an hereditary degenerate. George Fox's discontent with the shams of his age and his pining for spiritual veracity, it treats as symptoms of a disordered colon. All such mental tensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter, due to the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover."
Now the question of my professor, "Is he psychotic?", is the echo of that same bent of mind.

I think that, for the most part, Western psychologists have been overly reactive against Eastern psychologies. For one thing, they haven't perceived that these are psychologies. They think it's just muddled, fuzzy religion, and that there is nothing of value there for a hard psychological mind to consider. But they haven't really explored it well.

If you look at the mainstream models of sanity in Western psychology, there are remarkable similarities. For example, Gordon Allport and his classical description of maturity or mental health has as characteristics realistic perception, self-acceptance or comfort with oneself, compassion and warmth. There's no argument there—the two reconcile themselves very well. But—and this is a major theoretical and practical point—they diverge when Allport lists a strong ego-identity. One of the tenets of Buddhism holds that there is no abiding self, and thus ego identity itself is an illusion. So this is a major point of discrepancy.

Take Erikson's final stage of maturity in the life-cycle: he has as attributes the acceptance of one's life-circumstances, lack of resentment, absence of fear (especially of death). Again, there is no argument. But he adds ego-integrity, defending one's lifestyle, defending one's self. Again if one has no self, what is there to defend?

One of the closest fits to the characteristics of the Arhat is Maslow's self-actualized person. The self-actualized person has clear perception of reality, spontaneity, detachment (that is, relationships that aren't clinging, intrusive or possessive), independence from flattery, or criticism and compassion. Again, a good fit.

One of my favorites is from Ernest Becker who's describing Wilhelm Reich's concept of "character armor." I think Becker's analysis of the problem and his vision of the possibility is really a very good Western parallel. He says, "Character armor refers to the whole life-style that a person assumes in order to live and act with a certain security. We an have some because we all need to organize our personality. This organization is a process whereby some things have to be valued more than others; some acts have to be permitted, others forbidden; some lines of conduct have to be closed; some kinds of thought can be entertained, and others are taboo, and so on. Each person literally closes off his world and fences himself..."
around in the very process of his own growth and organization. This makes such people remarkably stiff, as Reich saw, as though they actually wore armor. It makes them remarkably unsympathetic to points of view they've decided are not worth entertaining or are too threatening to entertain. It shuts them off very tightly from others who risk invading their world and perhaps upsetting it, even if they upset it by kindness and love. Love draws one out, breaks down barriers, places the human relationship on more mutual terms. In a word, love takes relationships somewhat out of control of the armored person. It takes strength to love simply because it takes strength to stand exposed without armor, open to the needs of others.” That, of course, is the posture of the Arhant, or the person who has gone through the whole cycle: undefended, open to the needs of others. So, at least with regard to an ideal type of "sanity” there's some great overlapping here.

Although there are some similarities-Western psychologists and Buddhist psychologists all know what well-adjusted, mature people look like-there are some very real differences in the means described and in the nature of the ends, when you look closely. No Western psychology even dreams of the deep structural transformation of consciousness that Buddhist psychology offers as a possibility.

So on the one hand there are, at first glance, some similarities, but I think a closer look shows that there's a profound distinction between both means and goals, and it's a distinction which presents some very strong challenges to Western psychology.

REFERENCES


Requests for reprints to Daniel Goleman, 1028 8th Street, Boulder, Colorado 80302.