

TIBETAN BUDDHISM AND
PSYCHOTHERAPY: A CONVERSATION
WITH THE DALAI LAMA*

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I came to the town of Dharamsala in northern India to discuss with the monk-scholars, at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, several difficult points in a Buddhist philosophical treatise which I was translating. I also hoped that I would have an opportunity to meet the Dalai Lama and ask him some questions on a rather different topic. I had worked as a counseling psychologist before I took up the academic study of religion, and early in that career had been an enthusiastic advocate of yogic techniques as an adjunct in counseling. But the acquisition of a more critical attitude toward yoga, which was a by-product of my doctorate, had somewhat tempered my enthusiasm. The more I learned about Tibetan Buddhism, which was the area in which I specialized, the more I had begun to fear that attempts at cross-fertilizing Eastern and Western psychologies might only produce sterile hybrids.

*Cross-fertilizing
Eastern and
Western
psychologies*

During the Dalai Lama's second tour in the U.S. in 1981, I had an opportunity to ask him what he thought was the potential for such a cross-fertilization, and though cautiously optimistic, he said that he didn't believe Western science had as yet learned enough about the brain to appreciate the Buddhist teachings about the mind and consciousness.

His Holiness' answer had lodged in my mind, and during

*From *an* interview conducted on July 8, 1982. The Dalai Lama is the ecclesiastical leader of the living and historical tradition in Tibetan Buddhism. He is also the head of state of the nation of Tibet in exile in India since 1959 (see Dalai Lama, 1962).

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my stay in Dharamsala I hoped to be able to present new questions to him. Through his personal secretaries I requested an interview and to my surprise I learned that a one-hour interview had been granted. We met in a very tastefully decorated room, but the art on the walls was overshadowed by his presence, which I can only describe as radiant. And, as I discovered, his smile and ceaselessly sparkling eyes were so compelling that sometimes it was actually difficult to carry on a conversation-I just kept wanting to smile back. However, my questions had their own urgency, and after some brief courtesies I explained that, while pursuing my studies on Tibetan Buddhism, I had become less and less optimistic about the potential contributions which Buddhism could actually make to Western psychology. I had begun to wonder if the underlying structures of these two world views might be so radically different that fruitful interchange would be minimal. That most of the scholarly writing I had seen on the use of Buddhist practices in psychotherapy had seemed extraordinarily limited only reinforced this conclusion.

*different
assumptions
about
the nature
of consciousness*

My main concern was the apparent incommensurability of the empirical method used in Western science and the introspective method used in Buddhism. I used an illustration: Westerners generally believe that consciousness, whatever it may actually be, is confined to the physical body, and typically they do not believe that their consciousness either preceded their current life, nor do they believe that it will conclude its residence in this body by taking up residence in other bodies. Yet, reincarnation is a fundamental axiom in Tibetan Buddhism, and everything in it, from ethics to psychology, proceeds from this axiom. So how could Tibetan Buddhist concepts about consciousness be grafted onto Western psychology, when both have different axiomatic assumptions about the nature of consciousness?

*problem
of how to
understand
a person*

His Holiness agreed that there was a problem here whose root was "the way in which a *person* is understood by psychologists. I think there is a limitation here which mainly concerns the Western focus on this present life, while the Buddhadharmas concerns the whole cycle: not only this life, but the future life."

However, after this initial point of agreement, our conversation hit a snag-His Holiness was not conversant with Western scientific terminology, and I knew of no Tibetan equivalents. We began to wrestle with our inability to even communicate about the problem. His Holiness finally steered us around this snag by addressing his comments to a system of

thought with which he was familiar and which, like science, is also materialistic and rejects reincarnation.

Dalai Lama: "Now perhaps you know I have been taking some interest in Marxism. I am trying to make a dialogue between Buddhism and Marxism. Now the point is that Marxism only concerns this life, whereas Buddhism concerns not only this life, but some others. But, you see, the condition of this present life is also part of the thing which concerns Buddhists.

*a dialogue
between
Buddhism
and
Marxism*

"Now you see, a particular Marxist, whether he believes in the next life or not, that is his own business so long as he acts properly and sincerely for the benefit of mankind in this life. All right. Now, similarly, the psychologist may not be religious minded, not be a practitioner, not be concerned with or even not believe in future lives and is skeptical: well, that doesn't matter. As a professional, as a psychologist, he only needs to deal with this life and care sincerely but unbiasedly. Then his attitude toward future lives doesn't matter."

David Komito: I realized from this comment that His Holiness was trying to approach the problem of materialism by using Marxist dialectical materialism as an example, and, though it illustrated the importance of motivation, it really didn't get at the core of my concern. So I picked another example which would get at both problems of materialism and reductionism. Buddhism holds that consciousness can become embodied *ti.e.*, incarnate) in other life forms. It asserts that there are six different types of life forms, of which human life is only one. One's consciousness could incarnate in the body of an animal, for example. But Buddhist theory also claims there are four types of non-material bodies that can support consciousness-heavenly beings, hell beings, demi-gods or titans, and ghosts. Which of the six realms of beings one's consciousness is born into is dependent upon actions in the previous lives. The aspect of this six-realm scheme which made it serviceable as an example is the distinction that two realms are filled with material bodies, while the other four are filled with non-material bodies. The beings of the two material realms can be perceived by the five material senses, but the beings in the four non-material realms cannot be perceived by these material senses, though they can, according to Buddhism, be perceived by the mind, which is considered a non-material sense organ. Now, since Western science is strictly based on examinations of facts which can be known by the five senses, how could the belief in six realms of existence be

*the ability
of consciousness
to become
embodied*

*six realms
of
existence*

assimilated to Western scientific thinking? I had read and spoken to psychologists who have made this assimilation by viewing the teaching of the six realms as being metaphoric in nature, interpreting the meaning of the heaven realm, for example, as indicating a human existence which could be characterized as heavenly or by interpreting the animal realm to indicate the brutishness of some human lives. Yet, this is clearly not what the Buddhists mean when they talk among themselves about the six realms. They mean that a person can literally be reborn as an animal, or a god, *etc.* His Holiness asked if I meant that psychologists took the teachings as "not being true, but as sort of symbolic, that they don't take heaven as something separate from this world, but as something within human sight."

*possibility of
interpreting
Buddhist
teaching
as symbolic*

I said that was indeed what I meant, and asked if this metaphoric interpretation would be a distortion of the intentions of the Buddhist teaching, and as such couldn't it lead to considerable confusion. Metaphoric interpretations, for example, might help psychologists bring certain Buddhist techniques into their therapeutic practice, which might be helpful in the short run, but in the long run, wouldn't it actually be harmful? After all, Buddhists stress that Hell is real, and rebirth in Hell is to be avoided by practicing a specific code of morals in this present life. Wouldn't such moral teachings be weakened if they were merely taken symbolically?

*distinguishing
one's private
interpretation
from the
Buddhist view*

Dalai Lama: "I think you see, here, where someone is taking a definite interpretation about a certain Buddhist idea as his own interpretation, that is all right to do. But at the same time, if he says his interpretation is the same as the Buddhist interpretation, that may not be correct. Buddhism is something different from the interpretation of it. Now, regarding your example. In Buddhism there are certain specifically Buddhist things, such as these six realms. You see, we believe there are different forms of life, other than these human or animal forms which we can see and touch. We believe there are different forms of life than what we can see. This is the Buddhist interpretation. So you see that while another interpretation is possible, it is not the real Buddhist interpretation. To pretend it to be the Buddhist interpretation would be a degeneration. However, it's all right to make such symbolic interpretations, providing one makes clear that this is one's own view, whether correct or not. That's all right. No problem."

D. K.: "And this wouldn't lead to a degeneration of the teaching which might create more harm or confusion in the long run?"

Dalai Lama: "I don't think so." And then with laughter: "But in any case, you see, such things will happen whether we agree or not. They are going to take place. I think that in the past, in Buddhist history, I think that there one can find these sort of differing interpretations. Now, for example, take the different systems of thought, the Prasangika Miidhyamika and the Svatantrika Madhyamika [see Sopa & Hopkins, 1976]. My view is that the same Buddhist scripture of teaching has different interpretations. And in the Path also there are different interpretations, and in the canonical commentaries also a lot of different interpretations . . . that's all right."

*differing
interpretations
of teachings
possible
for different
people*

D. K.: "So it is appropriate to make different types of interpretations for different types of people, and this does not necessarily create confusion or cause the teachings to degenerate. "

With his last comment His Holiness had opened the door to an interchange between Buddhism and Western science which I had scarcely thought possible: a materialistic interpretation of the Buddhist teaching was acceptable provided that it was done with correct motivation (that is, for the benefit of suffering people), and provided that such interpretations are stated to *be* interpretations rather than definitive statements about Buddhist teachings.

As we had established a means for joining Buddhist teachings to psychotherapeutic practice, I was curious to enquire about how certain specific techniques might be used. So I asked a very practical question. "Physicians who treat people with diseases take precautions not to catch those diseases. Psychologists who deal with people who are suffering mentally also seem to be open to a kind of contagion from the immense suffering of their clients. For example, I found this to be a great problem for me, and when counseling severely depressed people, often I would also get very depressed. What could psychologists do who find themselves in this type of situation? What could they do so that they wouldn't get depressed by all the suffering they are exposed to, and still not lose the sensitivity which is required for effective treatment or counseling?"

*how can a
therapist
avoid
taking on the
suffering
of a client?*

Dalai Lama: "I think it is a good sign because you actually share the other's suffering, But I think there is a good kind and a bad kind. See, if someone is treating a patient without human feeling, almost like he is treating machinery, that is completely without importance. That is a bad sign. So now what we need is to share the other's suffering while utilizing

suffering
due to
bad
mental
views

wisdom and reason: sharing the other's suffering and concern. and in the meantime clearly realize that his suffering is due to bad mental views. Therefore you see, there is no problem if you think properly; there is no reason to fall under that kind of influence."

D. K.: "So the prevention is in the proper view or proper understanding? ,

Dalai Lama: "Yes. That is right."

D. K.: "As I understand it, Buddhism teaches that it is necessary to develop compassion and wisdom for true liberation. You seem to be suggesting here that for psychologists to maintain their human feeling, their compassion, while they work with these people, they need to develop this sense of wisdom. But most psychologists know very little about the actual practices of meditation which would develop this wisdom. Although they might intellectually be very interested in this wisdom which is the view of emptiness [the realization that things are devoid of the qualities we attribute to them), and what they could learn from that, I think that very few would be willing to actually practice meditation or follow any of the modes of discipline prescribed by the Buddhadharma. How is it going to be possible for them, then, to actually develop this view of emptiness which would help them to maintain human feeling for the patient, but prevent them from being totally involved in the sources of suffering? Is it helpful to simply maintain the intellectual view of emptiness? Will that work or must he practice?"

using
the logic of
common
sense

Dalai Lama: "Here you see, when I say wisdom, logic, reason, I don't necessarily mean the view of emptiness, but simply common sense. Yes. Nobody respects someone who is mad, or unstable or has a nervous breakdown. Now, suppose I'm treating someone or helping someone. There is no sense to my coming under that influence. You see, that kind of logic, not the kind that deals with Shunya [the view of emptiness or voidness] ... there's some difference."

Too much
anxiety
is of no use

Frankly, I found it hard to believe that mere logic could serve a prophylactic function in an intensive therapeutic encounter, and expressed my doubts. But His Holiness was quite certain. He elaborated: "Now, for example, you see, in our daily life when we face certain problems, a certain tragedy, we clearly realize that it is a problem or a tragedy which usually we do not want. So you see, this generates some anxiety, and too much anxiety is of no use. It neither

helps to solve the problem nor brings any peace of mind. It's absolutely of no use. And realizing that as the true situation, we can minimize anxiety. Because of that understanding of the situation, we can control that anxiety better."

D. K.: "This can be done rationally?"

Dalai Lama: "Yes. It does not involve the Shunya theory. That's something else to do."

My mind was stuck to a notion that mere rationality was impotent, so I approached the need for practice from a different angle. "Does Your Holiness feel that it would benefit psychologists if they could learn about the Shunya theory and, indeed, if they could practice it?" He burst into laughter, and then began to clarify the difference between rationality and the profound view which is the wisdom of emptiness, and the power of each.

Dalai Lama: "The subject of Shunya itself is complicated. . . . When our experiences reach a deeper level, then Shunya may happen. Now, I think that, you see, an example might be something like this: At present, you see, there are the [occupying] Chinese, who made a lot of mistakes in Tibet. They did the wrong thing for the Tibetan people. And thinking this, one might feel some sort of anger toward the Chinese. Then, using the mere rationality of the conventional wisdom, I think: Yes, it is true. We suffer under Chinese domination. We have the right to reject it, but you see, we can carry this feeling perfectly well without anger. If you feel anger, it is no harm to the Chinese, and instead, if you feel angry, you will lose your peace of mind. As a result, your own power of judgment, the human power of thinking will be lost. So, ultimately, if you feel angry, you will suffer, you will lose out. That is of no use. That sort of thinking [recognizing that anger is of no use] is the conventional kind of wisdom we can utilize. It is just common sense.

*an example
of
commonsense
wisdom*

"Now at a deeper level, you see, you have a feeling. One corner of my mind says: Oh yes, I know, I know; still they hurt me; I feel angry. You see, from a certain part of the mind after you put up all the conventional wisdom, you see, from this corner of the mind comes another conclusion, like a strong stubborn force that won't accept these reasons. Still you do not want to change. You see that reason, that logic, but still you do not want to change. You're stubborn. And the reason, the ultimate reason, is I feel angry. Now ego is coming up. Now on that level, where we deal with the ego, now the Shunya theory is relevant. What is the I? What is the ego? What is the basis of ego? Is there a basis or not?"

*the
Shunya
theory of
wisdom ..*

Now, you see, upon this further investigation, as we analyze, we find there is no basis of mind. That is the profound view. So usually the Shunya theory is not necessary." And he broke out into laughter again.

*the
problem of
dealing
with anger
in therapy*

D. K.: "Your Holiness mentions anger, and this is something I wanted to ask you about, because one of the things that is most difficult for psychologists to deal with is the anger of their clients. Certain techniques have been developed to cope with anger. One technique, for example, is to ask the client to 'Pretend the person you are angry with is sitting in this chair. Tell that person how angry you are. Express your feeling of anger. Get that feeling out of yourself.' Now, as I understand the Buddhist view, repeating that anger, expressing that anger, simply reinforces and perpetuates the karma formations of anger, so in the long run it would seem to me that this is a bad practice and will actually make people more angry or more predisposed toward anger. Do you think this interpretation is correct?"

*"anger
is of
no use"*

Dalai Lama: "That depends on actual circumstances, I think. You see, certain patients suffer not only from anger itself, but also because of having kept anger inside. In that case I think, you see, for temporary relaxation, express it, then finishing with it, go on to the next problem. But first, you see, you must deal with a problem which is not only anger, but results from so much being suppressed. Treat that separately, let them express it. Then, next deal with anger itself. Now, you see, we find more angry feelings as we continue. In fact they may increase. So now for that level it is better to think the line, "anger is of no use," even if you want to hurt your enemy. The effective offensive, the true effective counteraction will come without anger. So, ultimately, he can hurt or he can act against his enemy better through not being angry."

D. K.: "Yes. But what can be done for this deep-seated ever-recurring anger, which is beyond the bottled-up anger of the contemporary situation?"

*counteracting
anger by
increasing
patience*

Dalai Lama: "If I met such a person, I think first I would try to explain the uselessness of anger. See, he wants something, he wants happiness. But if another factor disturbs his happiness, he gets angry. Now, if you think properly, the anger, his own anger, is the real disturber of his mental peace. So this is useless, this is the uselessness of anger. Then, another way is patience, trying to increase patience. So these are the main reasons. But if there is no success,

then stop." He broke into laughter again. "Then, another thing is try to avoid the situation."

D. K.: "What about the development of love or compassion as an antidote for anger? Would this be something that might be recommended to these people?"

Dalai Lama: "If that patient has some background in Buddhism, then of course, you can adopt the view that the enemy is actually a real object from which you can gain much good merit and many good practices. But ordinary people, I don't know.... You see, the Buddhist person who practices Mahayana sees that for a real compassion, a real love, the practice which is necessary for the development of real love, real compassion, must be oriented toward the enemy. Once your love or compassion covers or reaches your enemy's side, then there are no problems of anger. Unless your love can reach your enemy, your love *is* biased, limited, one-sided. And there is every danger that that kind of love is actually influenced by a bad sense of desire or attachment towards perhaps people such as your own wife, your own parent, your children. These feelings apparently have the aspect of love or compassion towards your children, or your parent, or your wife. But actually, they are attachment, an extension of oneself.

*loving
your
enemy*

"Let me clarify this. The reason is that this kind of love is actually a kind of desire. Now, you see, when that situation occurs, the object that you feel compassion toward, if that side did something wrong or there is a different attitude, then your feelings immediately change. Because of that, you see, divorce and such things occur. The first few days, or few months, or few years, people are fond toward each other. That sort of compassion or love can be a very deep love. And somehow, you see, if the other's behavior changes even slightly, these feelings change completely and people almost become enemies. Now you see the actual love, the right kind of love or compassion is not based on a person's behavior, but on his suffering, his suffering nature. When you recognize his suffering nature, then whether his behavior is this or that, your compassion, your feeling will not change. You will not be affected."

*proper
compassion
is based on
a person's
suffering
nature*

D. K.: "So the truest love is the love for a person that is based on his suffering, a love which recognizes that suffering is integral to existence. And true love for a person arises when one encounters this suffering in another person. So the fact that due to this suffering they change in their way of

relating to you can now become a reason why you should love them more deeply rather than run away from them...

Dalai Lama: "Right. So you see, the antidote to anger depends on the individual person's background. If he knows certain Buddhist practices, then there are certain methods. So you see as a Buddhist, the practice of love and compassion will help to minimize anger."

D. K.: "Would it be advisable for psychologists to look at these Buddhist practices and try to employ them with their clients?"

Dalai Lama: "Let them practice. Fine."

can techniques such as visualization be misused?

D. K.: "Yet some of these practices are perhaps more subtle and thus more inappropriate to adopt. The specific question I have in mind relates to a certain technique that is now being developed which is called visualization. For example, certain healing practitioners claim that if there is an organ or a limb that is somewhat diseased, that by imagining that limb healthy in a kind of a meditation, that it is actually possible to make the disease go away and have the limb or organ become healthy again. Now some psychologists have looked at that sort of thing and wondered if there might be some visualizations that would help their clients. Some people have looked into the literature on Tantra which says if one meditates on such-and-such a deity, such-and-such a state of mind may be transformed, and they are wondering if such practices could help their clients. On the other hand, I've also read that these practices require the taking of great vows and that you must be a very advanced practitioner to do this sort of thing successfully. So do you think that if psychologists look into the literature on Tantra and bring Tantra into their own practices, they would perhaps be making some very great errors? Could they harm people because of their own lack of qualification to do these things?"

the importance of a proper orientation

Dalai Lama: "I think, here also, you see, the mere visualization of the mandala of some deity and also the mere practice of yoga, certain yoga breath control, even I think some practices with chakras, kundalini, subtle body-I think it is all right. Now, you see if you take, or if you practice, or you hold the visualization or mandala as a complete form, then, you see, without proper initiation, without proper background, you cannot practice, and even if you try to practice, there will be no good result. It is wrong. It is the wrong thing to do. But if you don't take it as

a complete form, as a Buddhist practice, but take a certain thing out of it and actually remain as a non-Buddhist, a non-religious minded practitioner . . . and in this fashion take certain actions, I think that is all right."

D. K.: "So then actually psychologists could look at these things and use them."

Dalai Lama: "I think so. Now, you see all this is my attitude or my judgment which is based on this: so long as it will benefit someone, it's OK. This is my main point. Now, you see, if someone becomes a mere scholar and is just curious and holds it to themselves, then it doesn't carry any weight, it's just a waste of time. Then there will be more restrictions. But so long as there is a good motivation for helping people. then with real human feeling, heavy human feeling, and through there being a desperate situation . . . then trying to collect a certain thing from Buddhism, a certain thing from Christianity. a certain thing from Marxism, a certain thing from this, this, that.

*let your
therapy
be based
on
helping
people*

D. K.: "It's OK?"

Dalai Lama: "Yes."

D. K.: "I understand that. I suppose I'd been afraid that if you take too much from here and here and here, a little bit from each, you might end up with something that might harm people rather than help them. Thank you very much."

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