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Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives on Emotions and Well-Being

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Abstract

Stimulated by a recent meeting between Western psychologists and the Dalai Lama on the topic of "Destructive Emotions," we report on two issues: The nature of afflictive and non-afflictive emotional states and traits and the achievement of enduring happiness – "sukha". Each section provides a Buddhist perspective; and the challenges the Buddhist view raises for empirical research and theory.

Buddhist and Psychological Perspectives on

Emotions and Well-Being

Buddhist thought arose more than 2,000 years ago in Asian cultures, and holds assumptions that differ in important ways from modern psychology. The particular branch of Buddhist thinking we consider is Indo-Tibetan, with roots in Indian thought, as further developed by Tibetan theorists. This line of thinking is more than one thousand years old.

Although different aspects of Buddhist thought have already influenced a number of psychologists, the challenges for research on emotion are not widely known. We chose two issues to illustrate the utility of considering Buddhist thought for work on emotion. Rather than a complete presentation, given the space allowed, we have only sought to illustrate with examples.

Our report grew out of an extraordinary meeting with H.H. the Dalai Lama, in Dharamsala, India, in March of 2000 that focused on "destructive emotions." Section headings mark what the *Buddhist* authors have written, and what was written by the *psychologist* authors.

The nature of afflictive and non-afflictive emotional states and traits and the achievement of enduring happiness – "sukha"

Buddhist View

Buddhists and psychologists alike believe that emotions strongly influence our thoughts, words, and actions; and at times, they help us in our pursuit of transient pleasures and satisfaction. From a Buddhist perspective, however, some emotions are

conducive to genuine and enduring happiness and others are not. The Buddhist term for such happiness is "sukha," which is a state of flourishing that arises from a state of mental balance and insight into the nature of reality. Rather than a fleeting emotion or mood, it is a state underlying and suffusing all emotional states. Many Buddhist contemplatives claim to have experienced such sukha, entailing a conceptually unstructured and unfiltered awareness of the true nature of reality.

Similarly, the Buddhist concept of "duhkha," often translated as "suffering," is not simply an unpleasant feeling. Rather, it refers to our basic vulnerability to suffering and pain due to misapprehending the nature of reality. (The terms sukha and duhkha are from the Sanskrit, which is one of the primary languages of Buddhist literature).

How is *sukha* to be realized? Buddhists believe that such radical transformation can occur by sustained training in refining attention, emotional balance, and mindfulness, so that one can learn to distinguish between the way things are as they perceptually appear, as opposed to the conceptual superimpositions one projects upon them. Consequently, one perceives what is presented to the senses, including mental perception, in a way that is closer to their true nature, as opposed to the reified projections that are imputed upon experience.

Through such training, shifts in fleeting emotions lead to changes in moods and eventually even in one's temperament. For over two millennia, Buddhist practitioners have developed and tested experiential approaches to gradually cultivating those emotions that are conductive to the pursuit of *sukha*, and freeing oneself from those that are detrimental to this pursuit. The ideal here is not simply to achieve one's own individual happiness, in isolation from others. Rather, the deepest Buddhist aspiration

incorporates the recognition of one's deep kinship with all beings, who share the same yearning to be free of suffering and to find a lasting state of well-being.

Two Research Directions.

We have begun to examine highly experienced Buddhist practitioners in regards to their biological activity during emotional episodes (Lutz, Greischar, Rawlings, Ricard & Davidson, in press), their sensitivity to the emotions of others, and how their interactive style may transform the nature of conflictual interactions. Such study of Buddhism's most expert practitioners may change psychology's conception of what at least some human beings are capable of achieving.

While much of the research on emotion has presumed that our participants and our patients can readily report on their subjective experience through questionnaires, and interviews, findings to date show that most people report only the most recent or most intense of their emotional experiences (e.g., Rosenberg & Ekman, 1994; Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber & Redelmeier, 1993) and are subject to bias. Research could determine whether those schooled in Buddhist practices would have a more refined and complete account of their immediately past emotional experience, exhibiting less judgmental biases. In a related vein, other research has demonstrated that most people are poor predictors of what will make them happy (e.g., Wilson & Gilbert, in press). It would be of great interest to examine whether such errors of affective forecasting would be reduced in those trained in Buddhist contemplative practices.

Afflictive Mental States

Buddhist View

The traditional languages of Buddhism, such as Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, have no word for "emotion" as such. Rather than distinguishing between emotions and other mental processes, Buddhism is concerned with understanding which types of mental activity are truly conducive to one's own and others' well-being, and which are harmful, especially in the long run.

A clear distinction is made between affective states that are directly aroused by the experience of pleasurable stimuli (sensory, as well as aesthetic and intellectual) and of *sukha*, which arises due to the attentional, emotional, and cognitive balance of the mind. (For a similar distinction, see Sheldon, Ryan, Deci and Kasser, 2004). The experience of pleasure is contingent upon specific times, places, and circumstances, and can easily change into a neutral or unpleasant feeling. When one disengages from the pleasant stimulus, the resultant pleasure vanishes.

The initial challenge of Buddhist meditative practice is not merely to suppress, let alone repress destructive mental states, but rather to identify how they arise, how they are experienced, and how they influence oneself and others over the long run. In addition, one learns to transform and finally free oneself from all afflictive states. This requires the cultivation and refinement of one's ability to introspectively monitor one's own mental activities, enabling one to distinguish disruptive from non-disruptive thoughts and emotions. In Buddhism there is a rigorous, sustained training in mindfulness and introspection that is conjoined with the cultivation of attentional stability and vividness.

In contrast to Aristotelian ethics, Buddhism rejects the notion that all emotions are healthy as long as they are not excessive or inappropriate to the time and place. Rather, Buddhism maintains that some mental states are afflictive regardless of the degree or context in which they arise. Let us focus on three mental processes that are considered to be fundamental toxins of the mind.

The first of these is craving. This mental process is based upon an unrealistic, reified distinction between self and others as being absolutely separate and unrelated. Craving is concerned with the acquisition or maintenance of desirable objects and situations for "me" and "mine," which may be threatened by "the other." One assumes the desirable qualities are inherent to the object, and then one exaggerates these qualities, while ignoring or de-emphasizing its undesirable aspects. Craving is therefore an unrealistic way of engaging with the world, and it is harmful whenever one identifies with it, regardless of how strong it is or the circumstances under which it arises.

Hatred is the second of the fundamental afflictions of the mind and is a reverse reflection of craving. That is, hatred, or malevolence, is driven by the wish to harm or destroy anything that obstructs the selfish pursuit of desirable objects and situations for "me" and "mine," which may be threatened by "the other." It exaggerates the undesirable qualities of its objects and de-emphasizes its positive qualities. As in the case of craving, when the mind is obsessed with resentment, it is trapped in the deluded impression that the source of its dissatisfaction belongs entirely to the external object. Even though the *trigger* of one's resentment may be the external object, the actual source of this and all other kinds of mental distress is in the mind alone.

Finally, the delusion of grasping onto one's own and others' reified personal identities is the most fundamental affliction of the mind. According to Buddhism, the self is constantly in a state of dynamic flux, arises in different ways, and is profoundly interdependent with other people and the environment. However, we habitually obscure the actual nature of the self with the conceptual superimpositions of permanence, singularity, and autonomy.

As a result of misapprehending the self as independent, there arises a strong sense of the absolute separation of self and other. Then, craving naturally arises for the "I" and "mine," and repulsion toward "the other." In this way, the reification of self and other, with the resultant false sense of an absolute duality between the two acts as the basis for the derivative mental afflictions of craving, hatred, jealousy, and arrogance. Such toxins of the mind are regarded as the fundamental sources of all mental suffering.

Theoretical Issues and Research Directions

Psychologists do not distinguish between beneficial or harmful emotions. Those who take an evolutionary view of emotion (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 2000; Ekman, 1992;), have proposed that over the history of our species, and currently, emotions are adaptive. Even those who categorize emotions as simply positive or negative (e.g., Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988) do not propose that all of the negative emotions are harmful to oneself or to others. The goal is not to rid oneself or transcend an emotion, not even hatred, but to regulate experience and action once an emotion is felt (Davidson, Jackson & Kalin, 2000) (note not all theorists consider hatred an emotion).

One point of convergence is that hostility, which is viewed in the West as a character or personality trait, is considered to be destructive to one's health. And impulsive chronic violence is also considered to be dysfunctional, and is classified as pathological (Davidson, Putnam & Larson, 2000). But neither of these is considered to be an emotion, *per se*.

Rather than focusing on increasing consciousness of one's inner state, the emphasis in psychology is on learning how to re-appraise situations (Lazarus, 1991), or control (regulate) emotional behavior and expressions (Gross, 1999).

The fact that there is no term in Buddhism for emotion, while discrepant from the modern research tradition on emotion that has isolated emotion as a process for explicit study, is actually quite consistent with what we know about the brain and emotion.

Every region in the brain that has been identified with some aspect of emotion has also been identified with aspects of cognition (e.g., Davidson & Irwin, 1999). The circuitry that supports affect and the circuitry that supports cognition are completely intertwined. This anatomical arrangement is consistent with the Buddhist view that these processes cannot be separated.

There is a growing literature based upon self-report measures of well-being that punctate events, even significant ones such as winning the lottery, phasically alter an individual's state of pleasure, but they do not change an individual's trait level of happiness. While the Buddhists agree that events such as winning the lottery would not alter an individual's dispositional level of happiness, they do assert that this dispositional trait (*sukha*) can be cultivated through specific practices. While trait positive affect as it has been used in the mood and temperament literature has some elements in common

with *sukha*, it does not capture the essence of the construct which includes a deep sense of well-being, a propensity toward compassion, less vulnerability to outer circumstances, and the recognition of the interconnectedness with people and other living beings in one's environment. Moreover, *sukha* is a trait and not a state. It is a dispositional quality that permeates and pervades all experience and behavior.

Equally important, the Buddhists provide a method for modifying affective traits and for cultivating *sukha*. In psychology, the only methods for changing enduring affective traits are those that have been developed specifically to treat psychopathology. With a few notable exceptions (Seligman, 1998) no effort has been invested in cultivating positive attributes of mind for individuals not suffering from mental disorders. Western approaches to changing enduring emotional states or traits do not include the long-term persistent effort that is involved in all complex skill learning, for example, in becoming a chess master or learning to play a musical instrument. Not even psychoanalysis or the most intensive forms of cognitive behavior therapy typically involves the decades Buddhists consider required to cultivate *sukha*.

Buddhists consider craving to be one of the primary "toxins of the mind." Unlike psychology, where craving is typically restricted to states produced by substances of abuse or by strongly appetitive opportunities that offer the potential for abuse (e.g., gambling; sex), Buddhists use this term more generically to encompass the acquisition of all desirable objects and situations for oneself. A growing corpus of neuroscientific literature teaches us that dopaminergic activity in the nucleus accumbens is common to states of craving that include both pharmacologically induced addictions and activities such as gambling. While activation of this system is highly reinforcing (i.e., it leads to

the recurrence of behaviors associated with its activation), it is not associated with pleasure in the long run. Of course, what is not included in this framework is anything akin to the notion of *sukha*.

In light of the fact that Buddhist contemplative practices are explicitly designed to counteract craving as one of their goals, it would be of great interest to empirically evaluate the efficacy of these methods as interventions for addictive disorders, which are disorders of craving and to determine if the brain systems associated with craving are altered by such training.

The Buddhist, but not Western view, considers hatred to be intrinsically harmful to those who experience it. This suggests a study examining the different ways in which those who have been exposed to a major trauma such as having a child murdered react emotionally to the perpetrator once he or she is apprehended. Various biological, health and social measures would provide information about the consequences of maintaining hatred or forgiveness toward the perpetrator.

Joint Conclusion

Buddhist conceptions and practices that deal with emotional life make three very distinct contributions to psychology. Conceptually they raise issues that have been ignored by many, calling on psychologists to make more finely nuanced distinctions in thinking about emotional experience. Methodologically they offer practices for enriching the potential for individuals to report on their own internal experiences, providing crucial data not otherwise available in that detail or comprehensiveness from the techniques now used to study subjective emotional experience. Finally, the practices themselves offer a therapy, not just for the disturbed, but also for all those who seek to improve the

quality of their lives. We hope what we have reported will serve to spark the interest of psychologists to learn more about this tradition.

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Footnotes

¹. The Participants at this meeting were: Richard Davidson, Paul Ekman, Owen Flannagen, Daniel Goleman, Mark Greenberg, Thupten Jinpa, Matthieu Ricard, Jeanne Tsai, Francisco Varela, Alan Wallace. We thank the Mind and Life Institute of Boulder Colorado for organizing this meeting, and a subsequent meeting during which the authors wrote this paper.

Additional Readings

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