

A Buddhist Approach to Counselling

Lama Jampa Thaye, spiritual director of the Dechen community of Sakya and Kagyu Buddhists, has noted the proliferation of psychological therapies and their often posited links to Buddhism. He would like to offer some points of guidance to enable practitioners of Buddhadharma and those with an interest in becoming practitioners to be able to decipher how counselling fits with the path of Dharma and, if necessary, to decide when counselling might be helpful.

As a practising counsellor, I have been asked to assist with formulating this guidance by clarifying points of convergence and divergence in relation to psychotherapies and Buddhadharma. In this way it is hoped that Buddhist practitioners can approach the subject with confidence, whether they are a practising counsellor, someone wishing to undertake counselling, or someone wanting to advise another about counselling.

Underlying the practice of counselling, and other psychological therapies, is the compassionate desire on the part of the practitioner and the theorist to be of help to those who are undergoing emotional and psychological suffering. This is shared ground with Dharma, in that there exists a common interest in understanding and wishing to dispel the causes of suffering. Many people who have an interest in therapy also have an interest in Buddhism and a number of Buddhist practitioners practise as counsellors and other types of psychological therapists.

In approaching the subject of psychotherapy, of which counselling is a part, we need to remind ourselves of the truths of the Dharma. The path of Dharma, as described by Lord Buddha Shakyamuni, is a means to enable us to work to overcome suffering and reveal the Buddhanature, using meditation and wholesome action to accumulate merit and develop wisdom. Buddhists begin this path by taking refuge in the three jewels of Buddha as our supreme teacher and guide, the Dharma as the path, and the Sangha as our support.

Worldly life is characterised by all-pervasive suffering, which arises due to clinging to the idea of the existence of a self. Buddhist masters teach that everything that arises in mind has no owner, is illusory, and is ultimately empty of any intrinsic nature. From the very beginning, the whole dharma path is marked by a moving away from the notion of 'self'. An important part of developing this understanding is to recognise that all that arises in mind appears due to the inevitable ripening of karma, and that ultimately all appearances are the play of emptiness and appearance. This position is a clear break from seeing phenomena as mine or related to me, and the beginning of a recognition that all things, external and internal, merely arise, have duration and then cease, like waves on the ocean.

Attachment to the constituents of samsara, including those things which are conventionally seen as one's emotional problems, prevent wisdom from arising. This illustrates how the view in Dharma is quite different from the basis of counselling and psychotherapy. Since this is the case, once one has fully entered the Dharma path and committed oneself to working on one's Dharma practice under the guidance of a spiritual teacher, then unless one's teacher advises otherwise, the practice of the methods provided by the Dharma are sufficient.

For a non-dharma practitioner, counselling is generally based on a view of the self as being autonomous, truly existent, permanent and capable of achieving a persistent state of happiness in worldly life. There is a belief that the individual can be independent, self-directing and capable of becoming whole, sometimes termed self-actualising, or fully-integrated. The purpose of life is invariably seen as being to work towards achieving one's human potential, to be happy, to achieve success in work, family, relationships, social, and material concerns.

Due to this belief that a state of continuing stability, happiness and contentment is possible, there is a sense of unfairness or discontent when this does not arise. Understandably there is a strong desire to use whatever worldly means are available in order to free oneself from suffering. However, counselling or any other therapy, whilst perhaps being reparative, can only ever provide a temporary relief from the vicissitudes of life.

There are models of counselling and psychotherapy which are described as Buddhist therapy, which aim to remedy the non-Buddhist theoretical views. The concept of a Buddhist psychotherapy, sometimes called contemplative psychotherapy, has become a subject of academic study, with many books and articles having been written in an attempt to delineate and describe its remit.

Nevertheless, in the traditional sense, counselling and psychotherapy are not part of Buddhism, since the path of Dharma is sufficient for the Buddhist practitioner. Buddhists who are qualified as professional counsellors and psychotherapists, do not usually - and, indeed, should not - teach the Dharma in this role, although their basis in Dharma and the values they are working to develop, should make them trustworthy people - as with Buddhists in any walk of life.

However, inevitably people approach the Dharma from a variety of social, emotional and intellectual backgrounds. Some are confused about whether to approach a counsellor in addition to, or instead of, a Buddhist teacher and are not necessarily prepared to wholeheartedly engage with the methods of the Dharma straightaway. To ask such people to eradicate the roots of suffering before they have an understanding and acceptance of such ideas, is either useless or detrimental. Thus for people who have not reached the stage of being able to benefit from authentic Dharma teachings, and who are experiencing emotional or psychological suffering, it may be appropriate to seek the help of a counsellor.

The counselling process of talking things through, in a compassionate, respectful and accepting atmosphere has undoubted worldly benefits. For many people, the sense of achieving some relief or resolution, or the feeling of gaining a better self-understanding helps them to get back on track in life and to cope again.

In summary, for someone who is approaching the Buddhist path, one needs to come to realise that one's life is precious because it presents a rare opportunity to practise the Dharma as the means to liberation. For the non-Buddhist, counselling cannot provide a path to enlightenment, but it can be a means by which one can be helped to recognise that one's life is valuable, and should not be taken for granted. The counsellor (in this context, the counsellor who is a Buddhist) is able to offer help to enable their client to live as happily as possible and without damaging themselves or others around them.

In terms of what model of counselling is appropriate for a Buddhist counsellor to practise, any model is suitable when underpinned with the Buddhist attitudes of compassion and kindness, and the intention to benefit others.

I hope that the above will be clear and helpful to those following or interested in the Dharma path who seek guidance with regard to counselling and the ground it shares with Buddhism, whether they are counsellors, or are considering undertaking counselling.

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