

BUDDHISM AND PSYCHOTHERAPY: PLANTING GOOD SEEDS

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Many of us tend to focus on the question, “What is wrong?” and we forget to ask the question, “What is right?” When something does not go right, we think that we have to get in touch with what is wrong with us, but in focusing on the negative we can make the situation worse. Instead, we could turn our attention to the many things that are not wrong. Even to ask the question, “What is right?” is already revolutionary. So I would like to propose that we all reflect on the human capacity to connect with what is wonderful and healing in this present moment. In Buddhism we call this the art of mindful living. When we live mindfully, we are in touch with suffering, but we are also in touch with non-suffering, with the things that are enjoyable.

We also have a tendency to get obsessed with the past. But you cannot go back to the past in order to repair the damage done there. The only moment available to you is the present moment. If you can get into this moment deeply, then you can fix the things done in the past and also take good care of the future. This might be called the basic principle of Buddhist therapy: the future and the past can be recognized and worked with in the present moment.

When you are not suffering much, and especially if you practice mindful living, then it is very easy to get in touch with the wonderful things in life that will nourish you, that will keep you from falling down into sickness. This kind of preventive medicine is much easier to practice than trying to heal yourself after you have become ill. When you have a lot of pain within yourself, it's very

hard for you to be in touch with beauty and joy. There may be a flower right in front of you, but you cannot touch it because you are so consumed with your suffering. It is possible for you to get out of yourself, to transform that pain so that you can connect with the flower again, but this is a much harder practice.

So this is the challenge that we face, as Buddhists or as psychotherapists: to help suffering people get in touch with the many things that are good in themselves and all around them. In order to be able to help others in this way, we need to start with ourselves, cultivating our capacity to enjoy the positive elements in life. We have to remember that we are more than our sorrow, more than our pain. When we try to help a person that is suffering a lot, we have to know ourselves how to get in touch with peace and joy so that we can help the other person to do the same. Without that personal understanding, we cannot succeed very much in the work of helping other people. Therefore, start with yourself because helping yourself is helping all of us.

In Buddhism, there is a treasure of literature called the *Abhidharma* and a very sophisticated teaching on mind called *Vijñānavada* “The School that Teaches About Consciousness.” I believe that Western psychotherapy can learn a great deal from these teachings on how the mind functions. The Sanskrit word for consciousness is *viññāna*. There are many functions of consciousness that we call by different names, but they are just aspects of the same thing. For example, a very deep level of consciousness is known as *alaya-viññāna*, the storehouse. Each experience is stored in the *alaya-viññāna* in the form of a seed or *bija*. Suppose you have a seed of happiness, formed when you learned to smile as a child. Maybe you have not smiled in the last twenty years, but that seed of smiling is still there. The reason you have not smiled in twenty years is that you have not given that seed a chance to be manifested on the upper level of consciousness, the *mano-viññāna*. You haven’t practiced it, so the seed of smiling has become weaker and weaker.

As another example, suppose you have a seed of sorrow in your *alaya-viññāna*. If someone says something to you, what he says enters your *mano-viññāna*. Right after that, it falls into your *alaya-viññāna* and triggers the seed of sorrow. Then the sorrow rises to the

surface and you feel the sorrow consciously. According to this teaching, everything manifested in the *mano-vijñāna* engenders a seed in the *alaya-vijñāna*, which strengthens similar seeds already there. The longer an experience stays in the *mano-vijñāna*, the more seeds it can create and plant in the depths of one's consciousness. So if you allow sorrow and pain to monopolize your *mano-vijñāna*, you have a lot of seeds of sorrow and pain in your *alaya-vijñāna*. These seeds will influence other seeds and transform them. The smiling seeds may have become so weak that they have a hard time emerging. That is why you have not smiled in twenty years.

We are the sum of our *bijas*. Whether we are happy or we suffer depends on the quality of the seeds within our *alaya-vijñāna*. When we are possessed by our pain and sorrow, we think we are only suffering and we want to die. But the fact is that we are more than our sorrow because we have a huge storehouse containing all kinds of *bijas*: the seeds of the Buddha, of peace, of happiness. So when I practice walking meditation, feeling the earth underneath my feet and smiling, I am giving myself a chance. I want my *mano-vijñāna* to be free from useless thinking, damaging anxieties, and so on, so that I can plant the seeds of peace and healing. When you plant these positive seeds in your *alaya-vijñāna*, they grow and counteract the negative seeds. Like antibodies, they know where to go and how to neutralize the foreign bodies. This transformation occurs without your conscious direction.

How do we work with someone whose *mano-vijñāna* is completely dominated by pain and suffering? She knows, in principle, that the flowers and sky are very beautiful, but in her condition she cannot connect to them. If you tell her to practice breathing and smiling, she cannot do it. She is too weak, too possessed by sorrow. At that point, it is too late to ask her to practice in that way. We need to remind her that she is more than her suffering, that in her *alaya-vijñāna* there are seeds of peace and happiness that can counter-balance her suffering. But how do we do this?

One day, I lost a very close friend who had given me a lot of joy. He had a heart attack and died during the night. The following night, I could not sleep because the loss of a friend like that was so painful. I knew that the next morning I had to deliver a speech

somewhere, so I wanted to sleep but it was very difficult with so much pain. I lay in bed and practiced breathing, visualizing the beautiful cedar trees in our yard. During walking meditation, I used to stop and bow to these trees and hug them, breathing in and out. It seemed to me that these cedars always repented to my hugging and breathing. So I invited the images of these beautiful trees, breathing in and out. I became only the trees and the breath. It was very helpful.

It was relatively easy for me to reconnect to beauty and peace that night because I practice breathing and smiling every day. But for those people who do not practice like that, the positive seeds may be too weak to counterbalance their suffering. If you were in such a situation, you would need a friend to sit by your side, hold your hand, listen to you and understand. After awhile, maybe you could appreciate the beauty and wonder of a flower again. So those people who are part of a supportive community, or *sangha*, with many friends to help them, are very fortunate. And even if they have only one friend left that can help them, still they are very lucky. But many people do not have such a *sangha* or such a friend and so they go to their therapist when they need help. Even here, if the therapist is good, he may help to plant good seeds in his clients.

According to the Buddhist teachings, sometimes you don't have to directly encounter the seeds of your suffering. Sometimes you just plant new seeds that have a healing, refreshing nature and they will counteract the suffering by themselves. There is another reason why we should be careful about inviting up seeds of negativity: everytime we bring them into the *mano-vijñana* they have a chance to plant more seeds in the *alaya-vijñana*. I would like you to meditate on this because Western psychotherapy tends to think that we have to integrate unconscious material into our zone of consciousness. So we talk about getting in touch with our suffering, getting in touch with our anger, and so on. But to that extent, we can lose touch with the positive experiences in life.

For example, you might not be very angry, but then you try to get in touch with it and express it, and you become more angry. Why? Because you invited the seeds of anger into consciousness, thinking you would get them out of your system. But by doing so,

you are practicing your anger and planting new seeds of anger in your *alaya-vijñana*. That is why the more you express your anger, the angrier you become. When I close the door and I hit my pillow, I think that I am getting the anger out of my system. The fact is that I am transforming the energy of anger into the energy of pouting and hitting. After some time, I get exhausted and feel better. But the seeds of anger are still there and may be stronger. I don't think that in the moment we hit the pillow, we are in touch with our anger. I don't think that we are even in touch with the pillow.

It might sound like I am saying that we should suppress our feelings. Not at all. I am only saying that sometimes we can transform the seeds of suffering without bringing them into the upper level of consciousness. And that sometimes, by expressing your anger, you rehearse it and make it stronger. I don't think it is wrong to help people get in touch with their suffering. I just don't think that is enough, and if we focus all our energy and attention to that, it can be counter-productive.

Let's look a little more deeply at the problem of anger. When something triggers your anger, what was a seed in your *alaya-vijñana* becomes manifest as a zone of energy burning in your body. The Buddhist practice is not to suppress the feeling of anger but to go back to the breathing and recognize anger as anger. "Breathing in, I know that I am angry. Breathing out, I know that I am angry." And you continue to practice like that: not saying anything, not doing anything. Just breathing and being aware of your anger. Often it is helpful to leave the place where you got angry and go into nature and do walking meditation. With the fresh air around you and the green color of the trees, it will be much easier to transform your anger into something else. After fifteen or twenty minutes, the anger will go down. You can share this with your clients when they get angry. You can say, "Come with me and take a walk." Don't say "walking meditation." That will complicate things. Everybody walks, everybody breathes. You just take your client into the open air and help them to walk and breathe for fifteen or thirty minutes. Many times that serves much better than if you sit and talk with the person in a room. The basic point is to take the things you have tried and found to be effective and then

share them with your clients. If you have found a Buddhist meditation practice or other technique to be helpful for you, it would seem strange not to offer it to your clients.

I would like to give another example of working with anger, since this is such a common problem. One day I received the news that a thirteen-year old girl traveling by boat from South Vietnam to Thailand was raped by sea pirates. After being raped, the little girl could not bear any children; she jumped into the ocean and drowned. The sea pirates killed 35 people on the boat. One of them survived and reported to the United Nations Commission on Refugees that many other attacks go unreported because the pirates kill everyone.

Hearing that news, I got angry and I had to practice breathing. I sat down and I just breathed in and out to calm my body, my mind, my feelings. I felt angry and sad and also helpless, knowing I couldn't do anything right away to stop the sea pirates. I practiced breathing for quite a long time in order to calm down the feelings and strengthen my being. When I felt calm, I began to breathe on the image of the little girl and I saw that I could be a sea pirate very easily. I saw myself as a baby born in a fishing village along the coast of Thailand. My father is a poor fisherman and a drunk. My mother doesn't know how to raise children properly, so I don't go to school. When I grow up, I become a poor fisherman like my father. And one day on the ocean, other fishermen say, "Let us try it just once, because the refugees have some gold and valuables. If we can take it, we can get out of our situation and not be poor, miserable fishermen for all our lives."

I was tempted by that because I never went to school and nobody taught me how to understand and to love. So I agreed and when I saw other fishermen doing things, I just joined in. So I committed the crime of raping the little girl. Now if you were there and you had a gun, you would shoot me and I would die. That's all. You didn't help me. Nobody helped me when I was born, or when I was a little boy, or when I became a poor fisherman. Now I do things like this because I have been raised like that. So killing me does not help. And last night, along the coast of Thailand, 500 or 600 babies were born in that way. And if economists, educators, and politicians

don't do anything for them, dozens of them will become at least sea pirates in twenty years.

As a result of your meditation, your anger for the sea pirates disappears. You know that you have to do something for the children in order for them not to become pirates. Once they have become pirates, shooting them doesn't help. You only make their mothers cry. So by meditating, you have seen into the nature of anger. As a result of that insight, compassion is born. Compassion is a source of energy just like anger. With your anger gone, transformed into insight and compassion, you know what to do and what not to do with the pirates or the pirate-to-be's that were born last night.

When we examine our experience, we find that there is a river of feeling flowing day and night inside each of us. The Buddhist practice of mindfulness of feeling is to sit on the bank of the river and just observe. But you are not only an observer; you have to penetrate deeply into each feeling and become one with it in order to gain insight. On the surface of the river, we experience the feelings as they manifest in the *mano-vijñana*. Looking more deeply, we see that each feeling has a root or several roots underneath the river, in the form of *bijas* or seeds. We can trace these roots without going back into the past. This is because when we deal with things in the present moment, everything in the past is present there in the form of seeds. So the practice of mindfulness of feeling is very present-centered.

When we look at the flower deeply enough, we see the non-flower elements within it. When we look at the garbage, we can also see the non-garbage elements within it, such as the flower, the cucumber and the lettuce. I think the good organic gardeners can see that, even if they don't practice meditation. They keep the garbage in order to transform it back into cucumbers and lettuce. Just as the flower is on its way to the garbage, the garbage is on its way to the flower.

This is the most important Buddhist teaching to me, the teaching of non-duality. This is because that is. If that is not, this cannot be. So the flower is not considering the garbage as its enemy, or vice versa. They realize the nature of interbeing in each other, so they don't panic. In a similar way, we can look at the flowers and gar-

bage within ourselves. The practice of meditation is just the practice of nourishing our flowers and transforming our garbage into flowers again. When we see garbage in ourselves, we are not afraid of it. There's nothing to throw out. I would like to invite psychotherapists to contemplate the practice of psychotherapy as an expression of non-duality. We can accept everything, transform anything. Even suffering can help, can teach us to be happy. A toothache, for example, can teach us to appreciate the joy of the non-toothache we had previously taken for granted.

We have to learn to practice nonviolence towards our feelings. When you are angry, be kind to your anger because you know that anger is what you are at this moment. Take good care of your anger like you take good care of your baby. You should not fight your anger. If you are angry at your anger, then your anger will be doubled and you will suffer more. That is the Buddhist teaching. When we practice breathing mindfully and look into the nature of our anger, we may be able to ask ourselves why someone acted cruelly to us. And very soon we will find the answer. Seeing into the roots of our anger, we are liberated from it.

There are young people who don't want to have anything to do with their fathers and mothers because in their childhood they suffered so much from their parents. But if they practice, they can see that all the seeds they received from their parents are still there and their parents have already suffered because of some of the seeds. As they understand how these seeds manifest in consciousness, they begin to see that their fathers and mothers may have been victims like them, that the seeds of suffering have been transmitted for many generations. If the young people do not transform those seeds, then they will transmit them to their own children. So through understanding, anger can be transformed into compassion. The seeds of understanding that come from looking deeply are the most powerful seeds that you can plant in your *alaya-vijñana* because the seeds of understanding will dissolve the seeds of delusion and aggression.

Looking deeply is not the same as thinking. Thinking may bring things together but it cannot discover the depths of things. We have to learn to trust our *alaya-vijñana* in the work of healing. Many times we do not have to think about our seeds of suffering. We only

need to plant the seeds of healing and then water them. For example, you pass someone on the street and you know that you once knew his name but you can't remember it. So you go home and you try very hard by your *mano-vijñana* to search for the name, making such an effort that before dinner you have a headache. Maybe after dinner you listen to some nice music and you go to sleep, not thinking about the name anymore. The next morning you wake up and while you are brushing your teeth, the name just pops up. When you were finally able to relax your *mano-vijñana*, your *alaya-vijñana* offered up the name. Enlightenment may be like that.

When you are able to relax your thinking, mindfulness can develop. When you encounter a flower mindfully, the flower becomes more real to you and you become more real and alive, too. As you continue to look deeply, you come to understand the true nature of the flower. The client that you are trying to help should be looked at in the same way. Looking deeply, you understand the roots of his or her problems and that insight will show you what to do and what not to do in order to help that person. So the practice of mindfulness is very important for therapists. If you are a good therapist, whether you are practicing meditation or not, I believe you know how to look into the nature of your clients. The difference is that in Buddhism we have elaborated many, many methods for doing that. Through our breathing, we can learn to look more deeply into things.

When someone says something unpleasant or cruel to you, there is a way to receive it, a kind of practice that prevents further harm from occurring. If you are well-trained, with the insight to look deeply into the roots behind the cruel action, then you are not hurt by it. It is like when a child has a headache and says something unpleasant, but the parents understand why the child is behaving that way, so there is no problem. However, if you do not practice and do not know how to deal with the harsh words, then a formation is created in you. This internal formation, or *samyojana*, will become a source of further suffering. Because we have a lot of seeds of delusion, of ignorance, of anger in us, external events can easily create formations in us.

From a Buddhist perspective, you practice mindful living in

order to prevent *samyojana* from forming. Once they have been planted, you meditate in order to neutralize and transform them. Suppose a couple has just been married and during the reception the husband said something boastful and untrue. As a result, his new wife loses some respect for him and she gets an internal formation. But if she is a practicing person, she would say to herself, "I cannot let it go like that. After the guests are gone, I must remember to talk to my husband about it. Otherwise it will be a seed that will last in me." So later on she asks her husband to explain his remarks at the reception. If he is also a practicing person, he will say that he is sorry and promise not to try to impress people in the future. So with that kind of commitment, the wife's internal formation is transformed.

But if she did not confront her husband, the *samyojana* would continue to be there. The next time her husband boasted in public, the formation would grow. After three or five years of living in such a mindless way, there will be many formations in her heart and in his that could lead to a divorce. Even if they do not talk about their problems, the children will know because the atmosphere will be so heavy and suffocating. Even before a child is born, it acquires formations from its mother: everything she drinks, every anger she experiences will penetrate to the baby. So we practice mindful living in order to avoid internal formations in ourselves and in our children, even before they are born.

There are times when we have to invite the internal formations up to the *mano-vijñāna* in order to have a conversation with them. This is how the young bride transformed her *samyojana*. Sometimes we invite the seed up and contemplate it alone. At other times we do it with a friend, with a teacher, or with a sangha. But sometimes our formations are so overwhelming that we do not have the capacity to deal with them. In that case, we shouldn't invite them up. We should get the help of a sangha, a friend, or a therapist and plant new healing seeds that will neutralize the *samyojana*. So depending on the circumstances, we may bring our formations to the surface or we may leave them at the bottom of our consciousness. We may work alone or with others. There are many ways.

We should recognize that the destruction of our environment and

the corruption of our society has created an enormous amount of suffering. If you only deal with the sick people, then you are not dealing with the roots of our problems. That is why I believe that therapists should engage deeply in the work to protect our environment and to prevent the destruction of our society by alcoholism, sexual abuse, and so on. You cannot spend all your time with your patients; you have to save some time to give the rest of us a helping hand.

I have a vision of every psychotherapist as a leader of a retreat, a retreat in which people have the time to stop in the present moment to enjoy the blue sky, to make peaceful steps, to smile at each other. I mean that each therapist should be able to animate and nourish a community of joyful people. The first thing is that the therapist herself would benefit from that community. You would like to go there, to be nourished. You take care of the flowers and after you have a lot of flowers, your work will become much easier. Then you don't have to make a lot of effort: the healing will come naturally. This has been my experience with healing communities.

When you practice mindful living—transforming yourself, making yourself happy and peaceful—you can transmit all this to your clients without saying that this is from Buddhism. Like I said earlier, you can share breathing and walking with someone without calling it “walking meditation.” Do it as if you don't practice. Practicing a non-practice is the highest kind of practice.