BUDDHIST Approaches to Mental Health

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What Constitutes a Spiritual Approach to Mental Health?

Some Basic Questions:
• Can we counsel in ways that are not spiritual?
• What do we mean by spiritual?
• Is our spirituality something we can separate from the rest of our being?
• What is the difference between: Psychotherapy, Spiritual counselling and Pastoral care?
• What is the common ground and what is distinct?

Some areas of experience have obvious possibilities for revealing spiritual meaning:
• Inspiring encounters, relationships and ideas
• Natural environments
• Grief, loss and fear
• Shame and remorse
• Response to world events / others’ experience

Ideas from a spiritual tradition can be introduced into the therapeutic process at a number of levels:
Overview of Buddhist Approaches to Psychotherapy

- Buddhism is a spiritual and religious tradition dating back to The Buddha who lived in the fifth century BCE.
- Buddhism has a rich variety of teaching relating to our mental states, and on working with mental process.
- These teachings have been developed through a number of schools which have each found their particular areas of emphasis and interest.
- Buddhism arrived in the West at a time when interest in psychology and mental process was growing.

As a result of these factors, In the West, Buddhist ideas have become influential in the development of a number of distinctively different forms of therapy. These differences reflect influence from different Buddhist schools, and differences which come from the integration of Buddhist ideas or method with the methods and theory of different therapeutic schools in the West. The picture is complex but the table below offers an, albeit simplified, model of some of the main approaches currently available, with examples of some of the textual roots of the ideas they incorporate.

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Key Buddhist Teachings

The Four Noble Truths

One of the key teachings of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths. This teaching was given by the Buddha soon after his enlightenment and is seen as fundamental to the Buddhist understanding of mind.

FIRST NOBLE TRUTH
DUKKHA: The reality of affliction and impermanence

SECOND NOBLE TRUTH
SAMSKARA: Arising (reaction) & Attachment (distraction)
Sensory Attachment
Becoming (self formation)
Non-Becoming (self-destruction)

THIRD NOBLE TRUTH
NIRODHA: Containment, stopping, unhooking

FOURTH NOBLE TRUTH
MARGA: Path

From this we derive a theory which suggests that
- The self is a defensive construct
- Mental problems are the result of delusion which arises in response to affliction, so grief or fear of impermanence is a common root
- There is a progression from sensory distraction to self building and ultimately destructiveness and the seeking of oblivion
- That this is an energetic process and that if the energy of the (grief) reaction is harnessed this will lead to a more grounded, spiritually healthy, life.
- That human psychology is basically a psychology of addiction and compulsion

In therapy this leads us to:
- Have a provisional attitude to self-view and focus more on a person’s engagement with their life-experience
- Not focus on building self-image or self-esteem
- See the experience of grief and disappointment as something with the potential to transform if it is honestly faced
- Look at ways in which the person is living outside the constraints of their self-image
Dependent Origination

- All things are dependent upon causes and conditions
- Mental states depend upon the object of attention
- Conditions create a likelihood of something happening, but they are not deterministic

The Object World
Our habits and senses are drawn to particular things because these are significant in our patterns of sense distraction and self-building. We live in a world of objects. People, places and things are significant in our lives. They affect our moods, our thoughts and our expectations. When we see a rose flowering, we probably feel happy. When we hear a baby crying, we may feel upset or irritated. When we see a sunset we may feel inspired. When we see a good friend we may feel love.

In Buddhist Psychology we say that the mind is conditioned by the object of attention. What we see conditions our emotional response. We like it or don’t like it. We identify with it or reject it. We have particular associations with it.

In therapy this leads us to
- Focus on the objects which a person talks about (people, places, things)
- Not bring the attention back to the person’s self-experience

Skandha Theory
A third teaching on which we draw extensively is that of the Skandhas. This shows how the creation of self-structures becomes a self-perpetuating cycle in which world view is conditioned by previous experience and consequent mental formations.
Skandha theory suggests that our perception of the world is “coloured” by our conditioned view. This are seen as “rupa” In other words, they are coloured by our self-building activity.

Object-Related Therapy

One of the key methods in the Other-Centred Buddhist approach which we teach derives from this theory of conditioned mind. It involves identifying significant objects as the client talks and keeping the person’s attention focused on them. By doing this, we can observe the client’s reaction (vedana) response. This might allow

- The client themselves to become more aware of their patterns of reactivity and the way these are conditioned. This involves investigating the “rupaness” of the object.
- The client to change their view of the object and thus change their mental state. This might mean reducing the “rupaness” of the object, or might mean changing a negative view to a positive one.

Gratitude, Appreciation and non-Judgement

The understanding of our dependently originated nature is particularly developed in the thinking of Pureland Schools of Buddhism. Here the emphasis is on our ordinary or “bombu” nature. Each person is seen as having infinite capacity to accumulate bad karma and yet as being surrounded by love and support in the form of the conditions which give rise to life.

Investigating our dependent nature is given form in the practice of Naikan, a Japanese therapy in which the participant works with three questions:

What have others done for me?
What have I done I return?
What trouble has my existence caused?

Naikan therapy tends to encourage

- A deep appreciation of life and others
- Regret at past events and ways in which one has not seen others

Taking place in a paradigm in which judgement is absent, however, it tends to lead to realism rather than guilt, catharsis and action rather than stagnation and self-justification.
A Comparison

In his book Naikan: grace, gratitude and the Japanese art of self-reflection, Gregg Krech gives the following list of elements contrasting features of a traditional Western approach to therapy with Naikan based methodologies. These features are ones that are very similar to those I would identify in the approach which we teach at Amida Trust.

From appendix for mental health professionals: Naikan and psychotherapy

1. Traditional: Focus on Feelings
   Naikan: Focus on Facts

2. Traditional: Revisit how you have been hurt and mistreated in the past
   Naikan: Revisit how you have been cared for and supported in the past

3. Traditional: The therapist validates the Client’s experiences
   Naikan: The therapist helps the client understand the experience of others

4. Traditional: Blame others for your problems
   Naikan: Take responsibility for your own conduct and the problems you cause others

5. Traditional: The therapist provides analysis and interpretation of the client’s experience
   Naikan: The therapist provides a structured framework for the client’s self-reflection

6. Traditional: Therapy helps clients increase self-esteem
   Naikan: Therapy helps clients increase appreciation of life
This pack has given a very brief introduction to a complex topic. If you want to read further, you might like to look at some of the following resources:

**FURTHER READING**

**Books on Buddhism and psychology by David and Caroline Brazier**

Brazier, C 2003 *Buddhism on the Couch* Ulysses US (also published as: *Buddhist Psychology*, Constable Robinson UK)

Brazier, C 2007 *The Other Buddhism* O-Books UK & US

Brazier, C 2009 *Guilt* O-Books UK & US

Brazier, C 2009 *Listening to the Other* O-Books UK & US


Brazier, D 2009 *Love and its Disappointments* O-Books UK & US

**Other significant books on Buddhist approaches in psychology showing a range of integrations:**

Akong Rimpoche 1994 *Taming the Tiger* Rider UK

Epstein, M. 1996 *Thoughts Without A Thinker* Duckworth, London

Kabat-Zinn, J 1990 *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* Delta, USA

Krech, G 2002 *Naikan: grace, gratitude and the Japanese art of self-reflection* Stonebridge Press, California USA

Reynolds, D 1980 *The Quiet Therapies*, University of Hawaii, Honolulu

Amida Trust offers attendance based training courses and distance learning courses in Buddhist approaches to psychology and psychotherapy. For further information about these courses or other aspects of the Brazier’s work please contact:

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You can contact us by email at courses@amidatrust.com or find more information on the web sites at www.amidatrust.com and www.buddhistpsychology.info

Gregg Krech is founder of Todo Institute which runs on-line and attendance based courses in Naikan and Morita therapy. Their web site is www.todoinstitute.org