

BUDDHISM AS PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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INTRODUCTION

This white paper is a manifesto explaining in the shortest possible way why Buddhism can be viewed as a psychology. Not only the Dhamma is replete of terms denoting mind or psyche throughout the written texts, the Nikayas (the Buddha's for about 17000 discourses) and the Abhidhamma (abstracted teachings considered as canonical), but foremost the first and second discourses of the Buddha can be explained as reflecting a psychological approach to end emotional suffering, the *raison d'être* why the Buddha started teaching his Dhamma in the first place to help humanity forward some 2600 years ago (Dhamma literally means memorables, worth to be remembered and disseminated in order for humanity to live a wholesome life).

THE FIRST DISCOURSE

The Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta or the Thread on the Setting of the Wheel of the Dhamma in Motion, is on the Four Ennobling Realities and is worldwide known as the "four noble truths." Psychologically speaking the Buddha's teaching is about experiencing the healing benefits of practicing what he considered to be the "middle way" between extremes toward the awakening of mind or psyche, called *bodhi*. A way of the middle does not condone the one and only eternal Truth because such truth is extreme and shy from the middle. Obviously there is a truth versus a lie, but a transcendental truth is surely not what the Buddha's teaching could imply. The Dhamma, proven by the Buddha to be effective, is rather a psychological way of life, which is by no means a religion in the Abrahamic sense where such truths are expounded. Dhamma is rather like the saying goes pointing at "the truth that lies in the middle." The translation by truth of the exacted word in Pali, the language of the Dhamma, might as well be translated by reality or fact as agreed by many Pali scholars. Thus, the Four Ennobling Realities rather than the Eurocentric and Christian-centric truth of the early translators which does not exist in the Dhamma. Ennobling points at the process of a practice that aims at becoming noble of heart and conduct or action, also known as *karma*, which is the highest attaining of practicing the Dhamma, i.e. to become an Arahant, who is noble because he or she has eradicated her or his inner enemies and is able to experiencing nirvana, the extinguishing of inner or emotional fires. Thus, a psychological interpretation of the first sutta reports the Buddha's Four Ennobling Realities.

I. The first ennobling reality is that there is *Dukkha*, which psychologically translates as "emotional suffering" comprising birth, aging, illness and death. In his period before choosing to become a wandering seeker, the Buddha as Prince Siddharta Gautama, secluded from outside suffering, saw for the first time four sights i.e. people suffering from aging, illness and death, and the sight of a mendicant that inspired him to go forth. These sights, ex birth, which refer to body might set readers on an exclusively bodily reading of suffering, suffering as bodily suffering to the detriment of a psychological view of suffering as emotional suffering. However, the Buddha based his teaching on a view of human beings as *namarupa*, meaning mindbody, whereby the primacy of psyche might have been emphasized in the reading of *namarupa*, not *rupanama*. No doubt, we need a body to experience anything at all and we need consciousness. These three factors are basic in understanding his Dhamma as a psychology, thus two psychological factors and one biological factor that might help us to understanding the psychology of emotional suffering in the double entendre of the sufferings of birth, aging, illness and death. The question now is: why is birth mostly a joyful event all over the world throughout all known ages and why is birth in the Buddha's take the start of suffering? It is not to discard the idea that birth is a

possible start of a human being's bodily suffering due to aging, illness and death or dying, but if we read further, the sutta points to suffering as "sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, despair, being with the unloved, not being with the loved, not reaching goals" which are all beyond any doubt psychological states and conditions. Quite enigmatically, the discourse ends this list of twelve sufferings with this sentence: In short, the five clinging khandhas (which refer to mindbody/namarupa, consciousness/vinnana, organ sensing/vedana, introspective perceiving/sanna and mental fabrications/samkhara, which seem to refer to what we nowadays would call cognition, emotion and motivation). These khandhas, or modalities as we would call them in psychology, can be clung unto to forming: I-me-mine/ego-self. All these factors and dimensions of life, save body or rupa, refer to psychological phenomena and because of the overwhelming scriptural evidence that we here talk psychology, it would be a serious shortcoming to merely consider the biological view of birth, aging, illness and death. When we would give the nama perspective a chance alongside the usual rupa perspective, then birth could be the birth of the clinging to khandhas to forming I-me-mine/ego-self, thus the birth of I. Aging would refer to the aging of me or self and illness would mean the inflation of ego to egotism which is even in mainstream psychology considered to be a "dis-ease" of a disturbed mind. Death including the prospect of dying would mean losing of everything what is dearly mine and belongs to I, me and self, my possessions or my loved ones, all of which define my identity as a person. Death, i.e. losing all of this is an emotional suffering which, however, has a positive flip side, i.e. the rebirth of the unwholesome self into a wholesome not-self, an experience that is considered to be a liberation of detrimental emotionality. Does this mean the end of our provisional householder index self? Obviously no! Not-self is an experience on the ultimate level of existence from which reset or reboot we could step back into life with a new and ever refreshing look. To summarize, it is about the birth, aging, illness and death of self-identity and what is lost which was mine might give rise to sorrow, lamentation, mental pain, grief, despair, being abandoned by loved ones, being left behind with the unloved, all of which was due to frustration of not having reached the goals set by I-me-mine/ego-self.

II. The second ennobling reality refers to the psychological insight that the underlying cause of all emotional suffering is craving that is rooted in unwholesome greed, hatred and ignorance, the so-called three poisons of the mind which will eventually result in depression, fearfulness, aggression and grief.

III. The third ennobling reality is that craving and consequent emotional disturbance can be ceased by choosing for the wholesome karma of thought, speech and action by balancing an eightfold practice, the Buddhist path or psychological middle way of life.

IV. Thus, the fourth ennobling reality is called in our psychological take, the Eightfold Balancing Practice. This comprises a balanced view on self and not-self, i.e. living from a foundation of not-self in a perilous world of selves who apparently do not automatically care for the practitioner's welfare. One in principle first needs to take care of oneself as in the oxygen mask principle of the stewardess who explains to putting the mask on our own face first before applying that to our children. So, first reset to an experiential view of not-self (1), then change unwholesome intentional karmic thoughts (2), karmic speech (3), karmic acts (4), in daily life (5) which requires effort and commitment (6), and start here-now by being constantly in full awareness of the inner and outer flux of events (7) and do it to begin with in concentrative attention (8). The latter two are known as mindfulness which we psychologically rather call heartfulness because we do all of this with the kindness of the brahmaviharas (loving-kindness, empathic compassion, shared joy and in equanimity, a balance within and without). Because our interpretation of the Eightfold Balancing Practice is centered in changing the karma of activity of thought, speech and behaviour, and because the Buddha declared himself to be a kammavadin, a specialist in karma or intentional action of thought, speech and behaviour, we call this Eightfold Balancing Practice KARMA TRANSFORMATION, which is in principle a therapeutic self modification strategy based on training. We can only guide and coach somebody else and that other person needs to always make the psychological change happen by himself or herself conform the Buddha's adage "be a light unto yourself." No one can change you but you.

THE SECOND DISCOURSE

The Buddha delivered his second talk five days after the first one, also at the Deer Park in Benares. It is known as the Anattalakkhana or Marks of Not-self Sutta; the same content can be found in the concept of Tilakkhana, described in the Dhammapada (277-279) which deals with the Three Empirical Marks of Existence. The psychological interpretation of this basic exposition is that existence is marked by three characteristics, which are: impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha) and not-self (anatta).

Existence in this world we live in progresses in time, we cannot set the clock backward and this principle we have also read in Heracleitos' work, in the sentence: we cannot step in the same river twice. Encircling the sun, planet earth goes with a speed of 110.000 km per hour. Aren't we in fact astronauts constantly travelling in our galaxy? Because of this constant moving forward we are always in development or growth toward a certain point which is called death, the only perfect state where the developing body as an integrative whole stands still. Emotional suffering comes about whenever we strive for perfection in this world of imperfection. Much emotional suffering stems from thinking "musts" and "shoulds" which express an innate tendency for perfectionism that will always result in failure while perfect states are unattainable. To stop this kind of suffering it is imperative to changing the perfectionistic demands we impose to ourselves into desires or wishes which non-attaining will be bearable and not terrible, the logical consequence of any demanding must or should. To be able to bear the imperfections of life will be easy and easier if we can take a not-self stance toward attaining and not attaining goals. This means a tolerance to frustration when goals are not met.

Letting go of I-me-mine/ego-self does not mean to be selfless as we will keep our provisional-household-index self in daily life which makes selflessness a self-sabotaging lopsided stance and not a middle way of healthy self-interest enabling to better help or serve others. Thus, in no way not-self implies a psychiatric "suicide" although the very term literally means the eradication of the psychological self including one's inner enemies. That is not the eradication of the body which would be better signified by "somacide". The art of Buddhist living lies therefore in the paradoxical adage: to be empty of self but to be at the same time full of experience. To be empty of self means bringing into practice that self cannot be caught. Whenever we think we have caught self in the fist, we will, due to impermanence, always be left empty handed, i.e. without a self. This implies a practice of living which never sticks to anything and a surfing on the waves of the sea toward balancing our way through the storms of existence. Yes, we row amid an ocean of impermanent troubles with one certainty, we will sink one day. Without the illusion of an abstract self that has no substance, we will be able to see things as they really are, impermanent and imperfect, and life will be much easier to bear.

LEVELS OF AWAKENING

The third issue to be dealt with in this manifesto are the levels of awakening that can be found throughout the scriptures and that is summarized in Buddhagoshā's Visuddhimagga. It is about the stream enterer (sotapana) who would need seven rebirths to become a once-returner (sakadagami), who will need one rebirth to become a non-returner (anagami), who will also need one more rebirth to become an Arahant (one who has eradicated inner enemies and attained nirvana, the extinguishment of inner fires, as a trait. Most, if not all, Theravada followers see these rebirths as a rebirth of body, but considering the exposition above, doubt is cast whether only the body is meant or the psychological rebirth of I-me-mine/ego-self as well. The psychological stance is clear: rebirth is about the rebirth of I-me-mine/ego-self rooted in the emotional poisons of greed, hatred and ignorance. As made clear in the classical texts, the first step to reach any of these awakening levels is to acquire a not-self stance which is beyond any doubt a psychological position pointing at psychological rebirths. The bone of contention here is also in these numbers, seven, one and one. What could be meant by these numbers? Is it possible that these numbers are symbolic, thus seven stands for completion of a series of rebirths of for instance anger or fear, which in principle might occur daily? To be sure, the first 5 disciples of the Buddha gained Arahantship one to five days after understanding the first and second discourses, indicating that seven is not a lawful number but an arbitrary number or symbolic number which might signify completion.

The same applies to "once," which might mean for instance once in a while or sometimes. Taking the rebirths as the rebirths of the body would bypass the nama perspective as explained above and to regressing into a rupa perspective which is not impossible but would lead Buddhism back to the strand of philosophy, metaphysics, cosmology and religion, thus away from psychology.

This ends the psychological interpretations of the Buddha's first two discourses and the levels toward becoming an Arahant. It is my contention that by interpreting the suttas the psychological way, we are at par with the Buddha's style of talking metaphors, analogies, parables and double entendres like in the Angulimala Sutta where stop has a double meaning: "I stopped already a long time ago when are you going to stop?" Reading various of these suttas like the Kalama Sutta, Anuradha Sutta, Madhupindika Sutta, Sabba Sutta, Rohitassa Sutta, Vacchagotta Sutta, Sallatha Sutta, Culamalunkya Sutta, to mention a few, I declare the Buddha to be the first (not-self) psychologist ever, who applied psychotherapy avant la lettre, even before the word or clinical profession existed as it exists today in academic circles as a professional discipline requiring a post university level of education. The present psychological view of the suttas is a restoration of the Dharma as a mind science conform the Buddha's Nikayas which steps away from but is surely not dwarfing or discarding the metaphysical or cosmological interpretations of the Dhamma. In line with the Mahayana description of the three turnings of the Dharma Wheel as 1. a middle way liberation quest (the Buddha), 2. a philosophical quest (Nagarjuna), 3. a religious quest (Asanga/Vasubandhu), this white paper manifesto submits, standing on the shoulders of these giants, that Buddhism as Psychology is the Fourth Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, already known as Buddhism 4.0, which is in full accord with the pristine teachings of the Buddha. Ehipassiko!

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