

Psychotherapy with a Buddhist perspective

Posted on

(Part I)



Are you struggling with hopelessness?

Buddhist psychotherapy integrates Buddhist philosophy and teachings with Western therapeutic models. “Psychotherapy with a Buddhist perspective (often termed Buddhist psychotherapy or contemplative psychotherapy) is a modern clinical framework that integrates traditional Buddhist psychology and philosophy with Western evidence-based therapeutic modalities. Rather than asking clients to adopt Buddhism as a religion, this approach applies its practical, empirical observations of the mind to reduce psychological distress and foster deep emotional resilience.” (AI Overview)

To practice Buddhist psychotherapy, we have to understand Buddhist psychology. It primarily means awakening through self-knowledge: understanding our decisions, actions, thoughts, feelings, and so forth. It aims to challenge our worldview by addressing the root of our psychological functioning, our sense of who we are, and our relationships with others and the world. First, you have to know the principles of Buddhist psychology, which is based on personal experience through introspection and self-observation.

According to Buddhist psychology, although the mind may initially be unreliable, it can be trained, calmed, and cultivated, making introspection an increasingly refined and dependable method.

Secondly, you must understand the fundamental concepts of Buddhist teachings and psychology. The Buddhist canon identifies non-self (anatta or anātman), impermanence (anicca or anithya), and suffering (dukkha) as the three characteristics, or marks, of existence.

The fundamental teachings consist mainly of causality, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, Satipat̐ t̐ hāna (mindfulness), and the Buddha’s sermons, including the Jātaka stories.

Here, the Four Noble Truths are:

1. The Noble Truth of Suffering.
2. The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering.
3. The Noble Truth of Cessation of Suffering.

4. The Noble Truth of the Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering.

Everyone is suffering from something in this world; at the very least, they need to pursue education, find a job, earn money, acquire a house, and properties. In this competition, they are suffering stress. Conversely, losing any of these things will lead to immense suffering.

According to Dhammacakkhapavattana Sūtra, it is Dukkha in Pali, “The meaning of dukkha here is ‘vile’ (du) and ‘empty (kha). Anything disgusting and empty, anything impermanent, without happiness, and without substance is called Dukkha.” The characteristic of dukkha, or suffering, is ‘affliction’ because it causes misery. Not only that, its function is to burn you and make you miserable. According to “Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, Aging means getting old, maturing, and decaying. Aging is also the basis of suffering. Nobody wants to get old, but everybody ages all the time. At every hour, every minute, every second, beings and things are getting older and older. You cannot escape this process of aging. This is a cause of unhappiness. Therefore, aging is also the basis or ground for suffering, and so aging is called suffering.” (The Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Venerable, U. Sīlānanda. p.138. Wisdom publication. Boston.) This description makes clear that nobody likes to die or, at least, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, distress, and suffering. Lamentation means ‘crying aloud.’ Pain means mental pain and grief, as there is no physical pain, according to psychology. For example, when you have to see what you don’t want to see, that is suffering (dukkha). Hearing is also the same.



Loneliness and hopelessness cause suffering.

The Sūtra explains that association with disliked individuals causes suffering, while separation from what you cherish, whether people or possessions, and whether through death or only temporarily, also causes suffering. In summary, regarding dukkha, the five aggregates of clinging represent suffering. This includes all beings and things, both animate and inanimate, which can become objects of clinging, craving, and wrong views. Accordingly, all five aggregates of clinging are suffering.

If they thought that they were lost, sometimes they would try to commit suicide, even at a young age. According to reports on suicide cases, this is an overview of the findings in the report: “More than 720,000 people die by suicide worldwide every year, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), with real-time trackers like World Meter estimating hundreds of thousands more accumulating through the current year based on these annual averages.” AI Overview. Sri Lanka recorded 3,285 suicide deaths in 2024, according to figures from the Sri Lanka Police data. Key Statistics: Total Deaths (2024): 3,285 total reported cases (2,664 men and 621 women). Daily Average: Roughly 9 to 12 lives lost each day. Overall Rate: Approximately 15 per 100,000 population, which remains higher than the global average. Gender Breakdown: Men account for a significantly higher

proportion of deaths by suicide than women (roughly a 4:1 or 5:1 ratio). Common Methods: Hanging has become the most frequent method, followed by pesticide self-poisoning.”

If suffering is a major problem, there is a way, a method, a practice by which to eradicate suffering. So, the Buddha’s message regarding the Noble Truth of suffering is not pessimistic; rather, it is realistic. The Buddha taught that peace and wisdom can help end suffering. We can understand this through a story from the period of Lord Buddha. “The tale of Rajjumālā” is a poignant Buddhist story about compassion and patience, illustrating how the Buddha transformed the life of a tormented servant. Mālā was a poor, orphan girl working as a servant in a Brahmin’s household near the village of Gayā. The Brahmin’s daughter-in-law constantly abused her and dragged her around by her long, beautiful hair. Desperate to stop the hair-pulling, Mālā shaved her head. Furious, her cruel mistress tied a rope (rajju) around her head and dragged her by it instead, earning her the nickname Rajjumālā. Unable to bear the physical and mental torture any longer, Rajjumālā went to a nearby forest intending to end her life. The Buddha, seeing her deep suffering with his compassionate eyes, waited for her along her path.

He called her gently by name, preached the Dhamma to her, and helped her understand the true nature of existence. Listening to his soothing words, her sorrows vanished, and she attained sotāpanna (Stream-entry, the first stage of enlightenment). Filled with inner peace, Rajjumālā returned home. When her mistress tried to pull her by the rope again, Rajjumālā calmly endured it without anger, showing profound loving-kindness. Puzzled by her serene reaction, the mistress asked why she wasn’t angry. Rajjumālā shared how she met the Buddha. The mistress, deeply moved and remorseful, visited the Buddha, listened to his teachings, and became a devoted follower. She freed Rajjumālā from servitude, treated her like a daughter, and gifted her fine clothes and jewelry. The Buddha later explained that the two women had their roles reversed in a past life, where the current mistress had been the abused slave and vowed revenge. Breaking this cycle of hatred brought true peace to them both.”



Ven Diypattugama Revatha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Siriwardhanaramaya Temple, Kollupitiya.