

# Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire: Buddhist Philosophical Therapy

DAVID BURTON

## A Philosophical Therapy?

It seems uncontroversial that Buddhism is therapeutic in intent.<sup>1</sup> The word ‘therapy’ is often used, however, to denote methods of treating medically defined mental illnesses, while in the Buddhist context it refers to the treatment of deep-seated dissatisfaction and confusion that, it is claimed, afflict us all. The Buddha is likened to a doctor who offers a medicine to cure the spiritual ills of the suffering world. In the Pāli scriptures, one of the epithets of the Buddha is ‘the Great Physician’ and the therapeutic regimen or healing treatment is his teaching, the *Dhamma*.<sup>2</sup> This metaphor is continued in later literature, most famously in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, where the Buddha is said to be like a benevolent doctor who attempts to administer appropriate medicine to his sons. In the Mahāyāna pantheon, one of the most popular of the celestial Buddhas is Bhaiṣajyaguru, the master of healing, who is believed to offer cures for both the spiritual and more mundane ailments of sentient beings.<sup>3</sup> The four truths, possibly the most pervasive of all Buddhist teachings, are expressed in the form of a medical diagnosis. The first truth, that there is suffering (*dukkha*), is the diagnosis of the disease. The second truth, that suffering arises from a cause (or causes), seeks to identify the root source of the disease. The third

<sup>1</sup> I use the umbrella term ‘Buddhism’ to refer to a wide variety of traditions and schools without intending to deny their very significant diversity of belief and practice.

<sup>2</sup> See *Theragāthā* 1111. Trans. Kenneth Roy Norman, *Poems of Early Buddhist Monks: Theragāthā* (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1997), p. 106; *Milindapañha* 334–336. Trans. Thomas William Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda, Part II*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894), pp. 216–220.

<sup>3</sup> See Raoul Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha* (Boulder: Shambala, 1979).

truth, that suffering can be ended, is a prognosis that the disease is curable. The fourth truth describes the path to end suffering, and is the prescription of treatment.<sup>4</sup>

That this Buddhist therapy might appropriately be labelled as ‘philosophy’ is more controversial, requiring some explanation and defence. Of course, there is no consensus about the nature and purpose of philosophy. It might be objected that the Buddha’s teaching is vehemently anti-philosophical, given his negative attitude to the metaphysical enquiries that have so often been the staple of the philosopher’s trade. Buddhist sources commonly exhibit a dismissive response to questions about metaphysical matters—such as the origin and extent of the universe and the post-mortem state of the person who has achieved enlightenment (*bodhi*)—which, it is claimed, have no bearing on the issue of curing suffering. The Buddha famously compares someone who is preoccupied with these speculative concerns to a person who is struck by a poisoned arrow and, instead of letting the surgeon immediately operate to remove it, hinders him with irrelevant questions about the origin and type of arrow. The questions are beside the point, and pursuing them is a distraction from the pressing existential task at hand. The Buddha claims that he does not offer answers to such questions; his teachings are pre-eminently practical, focused on the reality of suffering and the need to identify and overcome its causes.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it can be argued that the term ‘philosophy’ is of Western (European) provenance and has a particular cultural heritage; applying it to Buddhism could smack of the imperialist appropriation and subjugation of foreign world-views by presenting them in terms of a familiar but distorting concept from Western intellectual discourse.

These objections clearly have some validity and thus we should proceed with caution. Nevertheless, there is a good case for considering the Buddhist therapy to be a form of philosophy, even if it is one with its own peculiar characteristics. Not all philosophy is obsessed by metaphysical issues and some philosophies—for example, various forms of Empiricism and Existentialism—have eschewed such speculation. Furthermore, philosophy need not be, and often has not been, construed as an ‘ivory tower’ activity of intellectual cleverness divorced from everyday life; it sometimes offers solutions to

<sup>4</sup> See Rupert Getin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 59–84.

<sup>5</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 426–437. Trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, (Boston: Wisdom Books, 1995), pp. 533–541.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

people's most troubling and personal dissatisfactions and crises. Moreover, the claim that Buddhist and other types of 'Eastern' thought are not philosophy can itself be symptomatic of a Western arrogance which sees only European and European-derived cultures as capable of the argumentative and logical skills that are frequently considered to be the hallmarks of genuine philosophy.<sup>6</sup> This contention seems unsustainable and parochial given that many Indian forms of thought, including Buddhism, often have been attentive to the rules of correct thinking and rigorous debate.

Richard King argues that the conception of philosophy as a highly abstruse, technical and specialist activity with little or no bearing on the individual's experience has become dominant only in comparatively recent times. King contends that this tendency for philosophy to be divorced from the concerns of everyday life has occurred especially since the European Enlightenment and the advent of professionalised philosophy as an academic, secular discipline which often allies itself with scientific analysis and has been, with some notable exceptions, keen to distance itself from any topic which might be considered religious or spiritual. By contrast, far from eschewing interest in matters of ultimate concern to individuals—what might be termed 'meaning of life' questions—pre-Enlightenment thinkers in many cases saw it as the purpose of philosophy to address these issues.

In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*<sup>7</sup>, the Buddha discusses some 'misguided men' who 'learn the *Dhamma*' in the sense of becoming familiar with the Buddha's various sermons, sayings, expositions and so forth. However, they 'do not examine the meaning of those teachings with wisdom' and fail to achieve 'a reflective acceptance' of them. As a result 'they do not experience the good (*attha*) for the sake of which they learned the *Dhamma*.' Instead, they make use of the *Dhamma* only 'for the sake of criticising others and for winning debates.' The Buddha declares that such an attitude to the *Dhamma* is not simply useless; it actively will 'conduce to their harm and suffering for a long time.' In his commentary, Buddhaghosa (5<sup>th</sup> century CE) claims that the purpose of this passage is to explain the seriousness of the error of 'wrongly motivated acquisition of intellectual knowledge of the *Dhamma*.'<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Western thinkers have frequently regarded only their own tradition to be authentic philosophy. For a discussion of this point, see Richard King, *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), Chapters 2 and 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 132–142. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 224–236.

<sup>8</sup> Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 1208.

The Buddha proceeds to give the famous simile of the snake, in which the misguided man is compared to someone who grasps a venomous serpent in the wrong way, allowing it to bite him. Such a deluded person uses the Buddha's teaching for the sake of self-assertion and to exhibit his superior intelligence and knowledge. He employs his knowledge about the *Dhamma*, which is meant to be a therapy for wise living, to unwittingly demonstrate his lack of wisdom. The misguided person treats the truth as an intellectual acquisition and does not let it permeate his entire being. By contrast, the Buddha extols 'those disciples who examine the meaning' of his teachings 'with wisdom', achieve 'reflective acceptance' of them and, consequently, 'experience the good for the sake of which they learned the *Dhamma*'. Rather than seeking simply to criticise others and win debates, such people put into practice the Buddha's prescriptions and, therefore, 'those teachings, being rightly grasped by them, conduce to their welfare and happiness for a long time.' They use the Buddhist teachings as vehicles for self-transformation and correctly regard them as offering practical solutions to their keenly felt experience of suffering.

Commenting on this *sutta*, Jonardon Ganeri writes that the misguided man has a 'professional interest' in the truth and considers it to be of merely instrumental value—that is, as a means to win debates, demonstrate his intellectual prowess and achieve fame. By contrast, the disciple who genuinely pursues wisdom has a very different attitude to the truth; he is receptive to its power to affect him and re-orientate his mind. He allows the truth to 'blow through him', 'to run riot in the soul', letting it 'saturate the whole of his mental life' so that it reshapes 'not only his beliefs but also his hopes, his ideals, the stories he tells about himself, the concerns he has for himself and others.'<sup>9</sup>

### **Diseases of Belief and Desire**

Buddhism teaches that our affective states are closely connected to our views and that erroneous beliefs lie at the root of human unhappiness. A common Buddhist theme is that all things are

<sup>9</sup> Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 44–45 and 52.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

impermanent<sup>10</sup> and lack independent existence. The world is an unceasing flux of interconnected phenomena. However, we do not understand things as they really are (*yathābhūta*). Pāli texts provide extensive catalogues of the various ways in which people can hold wrong views (*micchādiṭṭhi*), for example, by accepting the existence of an eternal, unchanging soul or self.<sup>11</sup> These erroneous opinions have a deleterious effect on our values, so that we cherish things which, if we really understood their insubstantial nature, we would not endow with such significance. We find them desirable, sometimes highly desirable, and get caught in a web of attachments to them. Nāgārjuna (second to third centuries CE) declares that: ‘As a child with his notion of truth, falls in love with a mirror image, worldly people, due to delusion, are trapped in a thicket of objects.’<sup>12</sup> Given that things are impermanent, this reliance on them inevitably leads to suffering. Particularly pernicious is attachment to sensual things, dependent as it is on objects which are especially unreliable: ‘The Blessed One has stated how sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them’.<sup>13</sup> Attachment can also be to wealth, fame, friends, family, and so on. But it is not just attachment to external things that is problematic. One’s own self is actually a concatenation of transient events; it is one’s failure to recognise this fact and to adjust one’s values accordingly which, the Buddhists contend, often causes suffering, as one fails to come to terms with sickness, ageing and death.

It is evident that the Buddhists think that desires are not brute forces and it would be incorrect to consider them to be non-cognitive. Rather, they are intelligent in the sense that they are based on and responsive to beliefs, although, in another sense, the Buddhists think that many of our desires are decidedly not intelligent, in that they are based on erroneous views. Desires have a close relationship to views about what is valuable. We consider possessions, wealth, fame, one’s sense of self and so forth to have more value than they actually have, and thus we desire them inappropriately and get

<sup>10</sup> To be precise, the Pāli and other early Buddhist sources usually claim that all conditioned (*saṅkhata*) things are impermanent. The contrast here is with *nibbāna*, which is said to be unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) and permanent.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see *Dīgha Nikāya* I, 1–46. Trans. Maurice Walshe, *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, (London: Wisdom Publications, 1987), pp. 67–90.

<sup>12</sup> *Yuktiśaṣṭikā* 53. Trans. Joseph Loizzo, *Nāgārjuna’s Reason Sixty (Yuktiśaṣṭikā) with Candrakīrti’s Commentary (Yuktiśaṣṭikāvṛtti)* (New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2007). p. 203.

<sup>13</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 130. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 225.

attached to them which, given the reality of impermanence and insubstantiality, the Buddhists deems harmful to our well-being.<sup>14</sup>

Buddhism argues that our suffering is a result of deep attachment to uncontrollable and unreliable things. Buddhist philosophical therapy is, in this respect, about cultivating an attitude of 'letting go'. The things that we think matter so much are not worth being anxious, unhappy, and angry about. This solution should be cognitive, in the sense that the ignorance needs to be removed in order for the emotional relaxation to occur. This should rectify our values, so that impermanent, insubstantial things are no longer relied upon for a comfort and security which, in fact, they cannot give. Emotions and desires are expressions of our interpretation of the world; if our interpretation is out of accord with the way the world really is, then unhappiness will result. The Buddhist therapy therefore aims to align our interpretations with reality, thereby diminishing and eventually stopping the discontentment that results from unrealisable expectations.

This account indicates that, for Buddhism, the relationship between emotions and beliefs is causal. Moreover, the Buddhists do not think that the causal relationship between views and one's affective states is one-way. While beliefs influence desires and emotions, it is also the case that desires and emotions have an impact on beliefs. There is a psychological tendency for us to believe what we wish to be the case and not to accept beliefs that are unattractive to us. Desire often leads to rationalisation. So, it may be that I want to believe that things are permanent and substantial, and thus I am inclined to form this belief. It is because I want my desire for these things to be a source of happiness that I overlook the painful consequences of my craving and attachment. I am reluctant to believe things to be impermanent and insubstantial because I would then

<sup>14</sup> If the Buddhists claim that the problem is that that we overvalue these things, this implies that they might still have some value. Their value would presumably depend in part on whether the Buddhist is a monastic or layperson. Thus, possessions, wealth, family, career and so forth would have value to a layperson and, ideally, would not have value to monastics. However, the Buddhist would object that this is because the layperson is still in the grip of attachment and thus still endows these things with more value than they actually have. But even the strictest monastic Buddhist would give at least instrumental value to some basic possessions such as robes and alms bowl, for they are the implements which enable the monk or nun to live and continue to practise Buddhism. Moreover, the monastic communities in many cases rely on the wealth generated by the laity, which means that such wealth is valued at least as a means to support the continuation of Buddhism.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

have to modify my emotional attachments to them. Even if I do assent to the truth of impermanence and the folly of my attachments, I tend to ignore or marginalise this belief. I push it to the periphery of my awareness, because it is an inconvenient and uncomfortable truth that contradicts my wishes. Furthermore, desires blind us to the way things really are; they make us forgetful, distracted by the objects of our passions. Ignorance and desire are thus mutually assisting causes of suffering. They are intertwined and reinforce one another. This a point which is made most vividly in the Buddhist Wheel of Existence (*bhavacakra*) paintings, which, at the hub of the wheel, depict ignorance as a pig, hatred as a snake and greed as a cockerel, biting each others tails to symbolise that they are inseparably connected.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the Buddhist therapy is intended not only to inform one of the way things really are, but to provide techniques to stop one's misguided desires and emotions from rebelling against the truth that one already knows.

Contrary to a popular misconception, this Buddhist therapy is not intended to remove desire per se, but rather the particular types of desire that cause suffering. Buddhism considers desire to be a complex phenomenon, with both positive and negative forms. This complexity is evident in a verse from the *Udāna* in which the authentic monk (*bhikkhu*) is described as simultaneously desireless (*nirāso*) and desiring the goal (*atthakāmo*) of enlightenment:

Who lives by no craft, unburdened, desiring the goal,  
With restrained faculties, wholly released,  
Wandering homeless, unselfish, desireless,  
Conceit abandoned, solitary—he is a bhikkhu.<sup>16</sup>

Buddhist texts use many different terms for the varieties of desire. One of the most common is *chanda*, which is classified as 'ethically variable', meaning that it can have both ethically unwholesome (*akusala*) and wholesome (*kusala*) forms.<sup>17</sup> For example, *chanda* is considered to be unwholesome when directed at sensual objects

<sup>15</sup> Gethin, op. cit., pp. 158–159.

<sup>16</sup> *Udāna* 3.9. Trans. John D. Ireland, *The Udāna: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha and The Itivuttaka: The Buddha's Sayings* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2007), p. 48. See also David Webster, *The Philosophy of Desire in the Buddhist Pāli Canon* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 191.

<sup>17</sup> *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* II, 9. Trans. Mahāthera Nārada and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma. The Abhidhammattha Sangaha of Acariya Anuruddha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1993), pp. 91–94.



(*kāmachanda*)<sup>18</sup> whereas it can be wholesome when focused on ethical behaviour and spiritual progress. Thus, *chanda* is identified as one of the four bases of power (*iddhipāda*) which the Buddha claims to be necessary in order to achieve enlightenment.<sup>19</sup> Śāntideva (8th century CE) encourages the cultivation of this type of desire: ‘The powers of desire [*chanda*], perseverance, delight, and letting go, all lead to the fulfilment of the needs of living beings. Out of the fear of suffering, and while meditating on the praises, one should create desire.’<sup>20</sup> As Śāntideva indicates here, not only is desire for enlightenment necessary, but the desire to help other sentient beings is central to the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideal. This means that the supposed paradox of desire—that is, that the Buddhist is encouraged to desire to end all desire—is not real, because Buddhism does not promote the ending of all desire.<sup>21</sup>

Although various terms are employed to refer to desires that are unwholesome, one of the most widely used and best known is *taṇhā*—that is, craving or grasping. *Taṇhā* is a particular way of desiring which is productive of suffering and rooted in ignorance. As an impulse to possess the objects towards which it is directed, it is inherently selfish and appropriative, latching on to the object and sticking like glue. Thus, *taṇhā* is said to give rise to attachment (*upādāna*). Most obviously, *taṇhā* occurs in relation to mundane things such as sensual objects, wealth, fame, and so forth. However, the dangers of craving and attachment to non-sensual objects and experiences—such as sublime states of meditative absorption (*jhāna*)—are also warned against.<sup>22</sup> A traditional classification divides *taṇhā* into three types. First, there is the craving for sensual gratification (*kāmatanḥā*). Second, there is the craving for self-preservation

<sup>18</sup> *Visuddhimagga* IV, 85. Trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga by Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991, 5th edn.), p. 138.

<sup>19</sup> See *Samyutta Nikāya* V, 254–293. Trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 1718–1749.

<sup>20</sup> *Bodhicaryāvatāra* VII, 31. Trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra: A Guide to the Buddhist Path to Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1998), p. 69.

<sup>21</sup> On the apparent paradox of desire, see A.L. Herman, ‘A Solution to the Paradox of Desire in Buddhism’, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Jan., 1979), pp. 91–94; Wayne Alt, ‘There Is No Paradox of Desire in Buddhism’, *Philosophy East and West* 30.4 (1980), pp. 521–528.

<sup>22</sup> See *Majjhima Nikāya* II, 228–238. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 839–846.



## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

(*bhavaṭaṇhā*). As Padmasiri De Silva explains, this form of craving is closely connected to ‘the need for self-assertion, power, fame, wealth, recognition etc.’<sup>23</sup> Third, there is the craving for non-existence or destruction (*vibhavaṭaṇhā*) which lies at the root of aggressive impulses such as anger and hatred.

David Webster has pointed to evidence in the Pāli sources that even *taṇhā* may have a positive role at the beginning of the Buddhist path, given that grasping after spiritual truths is presumably better than grasping after sensual objects, fame and so forth. Craving for enlightenment might be the initial motivation for adopting the Buddhist therapy. However, *taṇhā* must eventually be replaced by, or transformed into, an unselfish, unattached form of desire, perhaps best described as an aspiration.<sup>24</sup>

Another common misconception is that the Buddhist therapy aims to extinguish all emotions. On the contrary, Buddhism is careful to distinguish between those affective states that are ethically unwholesome—such as hatred, jealousy, and avarice—and those that are ethically wholesome and have a positive role in the pursuit of enlightenment and are, in some cases, constitutive of the enlightened state itself. Psychological states with an affective dimension that are said to be very important on the path to enlightenment include faith or confidence (*saddhā*)<sup>25</sup> and the feeling of agitation, thrill or anxiety (*saṃvega*) produced by the realisation that liberation is an urgent requirement, given the extreme miseries of this world.<sup>26</sup> Buddhists also find a positive role for moral shame (*hiri*) and fear of doing wrong (*ottappa*), as emotions of conscience that deter one from performing morally unwholesome acts.<sup>27</sup> There are also the four divine abodes (*brahmavihāras*): a group of mental states which seem to be emotions or at least have some emotional content. They are friendliness (*mettā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*), all of which are highly valued and considered to be perfected in enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> It might be objected that *upekkhā* is not rightly named an emotion given that

<sup>23</sup> Padmasiri De Silva, *An Introduction to Buddhist Psychology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 4<sup>th</sup> edn), p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> Webster, op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>25</sup> *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* II, 5. Trans. Nārada and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 83–84.

<sup>26</sup> De Silva, op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>27</sup> *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* II, 5. Trans. Nārada and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>28</sup> See *Dīgha Nikāya* I, 235–252. Trans. Walshe, op. cit., pp. 187–195.

Buddhaghosa says it is a state of peaceful neutrality and impartiality, neither pleasant nor painful, and without either joy or grief.<sup>29</sup> If this is an emotion, it is of an unusual, pacific type. Alternatively, it might be characterised as the absence of emotion. At any rate, the other three divine abodes are recognisably akin to what we think of as emotions, or at least have an affective dimension. So, it seems accurate to claim that the enlightened person is not devoid of emotions, but has used the Buddhist therapy to eradicate all affective states that are rooted in delusion.

### **Emotional and Cognitive Dispositions**

There are numerous Buddhist critiques of the mistaken beliefs in the permanence and substantiality of the self and other things. Nor do the Buddhists tire of pointing out the irrationality of reliance on that which is transient. In addition, they devote considerable energy to positive demonstrations of the coherence and rationality of their own beliefs that there is no self and all things are impermanent and insubstantial.<sup>30</sup> These are attempts to persuade using reason and to replace error with truth in order to remove both the ignorance and the attachment that cause suffering.

However, the mere rehearsal of arguments can be a fairly ineffective way of changing beliefs, desires and emotions that are, in many cases, deeply engrained. Simply announcing that all things are impermanent and insubstantial, and that one should not desire them, is unlikely to provide liberation, nor does listening to a logical argument usually have great existential impact. Such rational analysis commonly has relatively little effect on our attitudes and personality. Our convictions, desires and emotions are often unruly, and not so easily convinced by the voice of reason.

This recalcitrance is recognised in numerous Buddhist sources, according to which our minds are under the sway of deeply engrained emotional and cognitive habits which it can be extremely difficult to remove or transform through straightforward rational considerations. For example, in fourteenth and fifteenth century Tibet, there was a popular notion that there are two forms of ignorance, one which is non-linguistic and unlearned, and the other linguistic and acquired

<sup>29</sup> *Visuddhimagga* IV, 155–197. Trans. Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 156–164.

<sup>30</sup> For an analysis of the Buddhist arguments, see Mark Siderits, *Empty Persons: Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

through learning. This is a distinction made by Tsong kha pa, Sakya mchog ldan and others.<sup>31</sup> A particularly articulate exposition of the difference between these two types of ignorance is found in mKhas grub rje's *Stong thun chen mo*:

There are two kinds of mistaken conceptions: the philosophical (*kun brtags*) and the innate (*lhan skyes*). The philosophical [kind] refers to the philosopher's belief (*dam bcha' ba*) regarding the variety of ways in which things could inherently exist [that is, have permanent and substantial existence], arrived at through the invention (*sgro brtags*) of a host of reasons that [they claim] prove that things inherently exist. The innate kind is something that has been part and parcel of every sentient being without distinction since beginningless time.<sup>32</sup>

Philosophical misconceptions are the theories and doctrines developed by philosophers and religious thinkers positing the existence of permanent and substantial entities such as the soul, God, eternal atoms and so forth. However, most sentient beings are not philosophers, and many do not have any explicitly held beliefs of the aforementioned type. Yet they do possess an innate misconception even if it is not, in most cases, made explicit through language and conceptuality. And the philosopher's mistaken theories are simply explications and rationalisations of a deeply rooted innate ignorance which he or she shares with all other unenlightened sentient beings. Even animals, mKhas grub rje contends, have this innate misconception.

He claims that, while it is important to eradicate both philosophical and innate misconceptions, the chief object to be removed must be the innate misconception, because it is this which traps sentient beings in a state of suffering. In other words, the philosophers' misguided theories are a relatively superficial problem; at best, mKhas grub rje says, refuting them through various arguments can be a 'stepping stone' (*yan lag*) to the more important eradication of the innate misconception. The philosophical misconceptions are more symptom than cause of our predicament. To support this position, mKhas grub rje quotes an amusing passage from the

<sup>31</sup> José Cabezón, *Dose of Emptiness: An Annotated Translation of the sTong thun chen mo of mKhas grub dGe legs dpal bzang* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 456–457.

<sup>32</sup> *Stong thun chen mo* 132. Trans. Cabezón, op. cit., pp. 128–129. Slightly modified. mKhas grub rje's entire analysis of innate and philosophical misconceptions occurs in the *Stong thun chen mo* 132–140. Trans. Cabezón, op. cit., pp. 128–135.

*Madhyamakāvātāra* by Candrakīrti (7<sup>th</sup> century CE) who writes that refutation of the view that there is a permanent self will not destroy one's attachment to the ego. To claim otherwise is comparable to the absurd belief that the realisation that there is no elephant in a room will destroy all fear of a snake that is lurking along the far wall!<sup>33</sup> mKhas grub rje evidently interprets this passage to mean that the refutation of the rather obvious philosophical misconceptions (the elephant) will not eradicate the less obvious and deep rooted innate misconception (the snake).

The notion that there are entrenched cognitive and emotional habitual tendencies that contribute to suffering was not new to Buddhism in fourteenth and fifteenth century Tibet. On the contrary, the idea has ancient roots. In the Pāli scriptures, the term '*amusaya*' is used to refer to dispositions which, it is claimed, initially lie dormant in the mind. The dialogues of the Buddha identify various *amusayas* including dispositions to sensuous craving or lust (*kāmarāga*), aversion (*paṭigha*), conceit (*māna*), wrong view (*diṭṭhi*), attachment to rules and observances (*sīlabbataparāmāsa*), doubt (*vicikicchā*), craving for existence (*bhavarāga*), and ignorance (*avijjā*). They represent the potential for the corresponding active emotional and cognitive afflictions (*kilesa*) to arise. De Silva writes that these *amusayas* are 'basically dormant passions which become excited into action by suitable stimuli'.<sup>34</sup> They represent our inclination to respond to certain types of stimulation in habitual ways. For instance, lust and aversion are said to be the inveterate responses to pleasant and painful feelings respectively.<sup>35</sup>

The question arises as to the origin of these *amusayas*. It seems likely that they are in part the result of a long history of socialisation, responses to experiences that have been learned since early childhood. It is also highly plausible that tendencies to aggression, lust and so forth are due in part to our genetic inheritance, although this explanation was not open to Buddhists in pre-Mendelian times. The Pāli scriptures state the Buddha's view that the *amusayas* exist even in small children, as a result of *kamma* from previous lives. A very young child, the Buddha contends, has not yet developed concepts such as 'self', 'lust' and 'hatred', and has not yet started to respond

<sup>33</sup> *Madhyamakāvātāra* VI, 140–141. Cited in *Stong thun chen mo* 134. Trans. Cabezón, op. cit., pp. 130.

<sup>34</sup> De Silva, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>35</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya*, III, 285. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 1134; See also *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 303. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., p. 401.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

to the world in terms of these ideas and emotions. Nevertheless, they exist within the child as dispositions ready to be activated once the child's cognitive capacities have developed and the appropriate stimulus occurs.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, he claims that without removing these dispositions, liberation from suffering cannot be achieved.<sup>37</sup>

The notion of underlying psychological tendencies is further developed by the Sautrāntika Buddhists, as recorded in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. They distinguish between the afflictions (*kleśa*) as latent dispositions (*anuśaya*), which are a hibernating karmic residue from past existences, and the manifest *kleśas* which are the actual occurrences of the afflictions of greed, hatred, delusion and so forth. A latent disposition when stimulated by an appropriate object causes a manifest affliction to occur. The Sautrāntikas' most significant and suggestive innovation was the introduction of the seed (*bhīja*) as a metaphor representing the latent dispositions.<sup>38</sup> It appears that this metaphor developed into the Yogācāra notion of the storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), a subterranean torrent of mental events which functions as a repository for the seeds which are the latent dispositions.<sup>39</sup>

From a therapeutic perspective, the most important point is that liberation from suffering is said to require that the seeds be eradicated. The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* says that the enlightened person's 'destroyed afflictions will not be able to sprout again' and that the afflictions have been destroyed completely, 'like seeds burned by fire.'<sup>40</sup> So, the task for Buddhist philosophical therapy is to eradicate not just the active manifestations of greed, hatred and delusion, but also the dispositions which give rise to them.

### Therapeutic Techniques

Buddhism employs a range of methods intended to remove the harmful, stubborn dispositions. For instance, the efficacy of verbal

<sup>36</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 432–433. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 537–538.

<sup>37</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* III, 285. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 1134–1135.

<sup>38</sup> *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* V 1d-2a. Trans. William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious. The Ālaya-vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> On the *ālaya-vijñāna*, see Waldron, op. cit., pp. 89–169.

<sup>40</sup> *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* II 36d. Trans. Waldron, op. cit., p. 75.

communication is highlighted. Buddhist teachings were originally preserved in an oral form. Many of the Buddhist scriptures are purportedly records of dialogues that took place between the Buddha and various disciples. In these conversations, the Buddha is represented as responding to the particular questions and spiritual needs of his interlocutors. The importance of 'spiritual' or 'beautiful' friendship (*kalyāṇamitratā*) is emphasised, particularly between an experienced teacher and pupil. The teacher, in intimate communication with the student, can formulate guidance in dependence upon the student's particular requirements.

Buddhist writings also make copious use of literary forms such as parable, metaphor, and contextualised descriptions. Some of the most popular Buddhist scriptures in the Theravāda tradition are the *Jātakas*, colourful and often poignant stories about the Buddha's previous lives which teach lessons about Buddhist virtues such as wisdom, generosity and compassion. The parables of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* and the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* as well as various stories of exemplary Buddhist saints play a similar role in Mahāyāna traditions. Buddhist teachings commonly incorporate familiar imagery from everyday life. Images of streams and rivers, local flora and fauna, agricultural husbandry and so forth are used to explain various Buddhist ideas. These metaphors would have been especially rich in meaning for the intended audience, living in a predominantly agrarian society and thus in close association with the natural environment. For example, the Buddhist view of consciousness is frequently illustrated by means of the metaphor of the stream or river and, as we have seen already, the image of the seed is employed to elucidate the notion of underlying dispositions.<sup>41</sup> Such literary styles are highly effective ways of making abstract teachings comprehensible and pertinent, thus making it more likely that they will have a transformative effect on the personality.

In addition, non-literary forms of therapy are very widely employed in Buddhism. Memorisation through recitation is commonly practised: teachings will be chanted in rituals often with the intention (among others) of lodging them firmly in the practitioners' minds. Frequently repeated views about impermanence and the harmfulness of craving and so forth are less likely to be forgotten, and more likely to be brought to mind when they are needed to combat the onslaught of the afflictions. In insight meditation

<sup>41</sup> Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 165–176; 218–224; 247–261.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

(*vipaśyana*) a common method employed is repeated reflection on important Buddhist teachings and the arguments in support of these teachings while in a concentrated state of consciousness. This is a technique which is meant to penetrate the deeper layers of delusion which cloud the mind. There are also many examples of confession used as a spiritual practice. The Theravāda Vinaya requires the monastic community to undertake confession in which individuals make public their transgressions of monastic precepts and rules.<sup>42</sup> In Mahāyāna Buddhism, confession of one's faults (*pāpadeśanā*) is one of the key elements of the liturgy referred to as 'the Supreme Worship' (*anuttarapūjā*).<sup>43</sup> Perhaps the best known example of this Mahāyāna confessional practice is found in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, who laments and reflects on the seriousness of the various evil deeds he has committed, and uses this confessional mood to commit himself more firmly to the Buddhist path.<sup>44</sup> Confession, then, is viewed as a means for honest recognition of the grip that the afflictions of greed, hatred and delusion have upon one's mind. This to be coupled with a resolve to observe ethical precepts intended to prevent future ethically unwholesome behaviour and thoughts.

One of the most important Buddhist therapeutic methods is introspection and self-analysis. In Pāli sources, terms such as mindfulness (*sati*) and thorough attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) are commonly used to refer to the ability to be aware of the desires, emotions, and beliefs that arise in the mind. The Buddha recommends the application of constant mindfulness to one's body, sensations and thoughts.<sup>45</sup> And he compares the capacity to introspect to the reflective power of a mirror. Just as a mirror will reveal the true appearance of the face with all its blemishes, so introspective awareness allows one to examine the mind and notice its imperfections, that is, the afflictions of greed, hatred and delusion. Presumably, by devoting sustained attention to the contents of the mind, those dispositions of which we may have been previously unaware will become apparent. He goes on to advise that, having reflected in this way, only those

<sup>42</sup> See *Mahāvagga* 27, 1–15. Trans. Isaline B. Horner, *The Book of Discipline, volume IV* (London: Luzac, 1971), p. 167; *Cullavagga* IV 30–34. Trans. Isaline B. Horner, *The Book of Discipline, volume V* (London: Luzac, 1963), pp. 138–140.

<sup>43</sup> See Crosby and Skilton, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–13.

<sup>44</sup> *Bodhicaryāvatāra* II, 27–66. Trans. Crosby and Skilton, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–19.

<sup>45</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* II, 290–315. Trans. Walshe, *op. cit.*, pp. 335–350.



actions of body, speech and mind that are harmful to neither oneself nor others should be performed.<sup>46</sup>

The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* says that it is the lack of this thorough attention (*ayoniśo manaskāra*) that allows outbursts of the afflictions to occur.<sup>47</sup> Without mindfulness, the afflictions will go unnoticed, and there will be no possibility of taking effective action to remove them. With mindfulness, the opportunity arises to exert oneself to restrain and abandon ethically unwholesome states of mind, and to cultivate and maintain those that are wholesome. In this respect, the Buddhist therapy has both a purgative and a tonic aspect. The afflictions are vices to be purged from the mind like poison that needs to be completely expelled from the body; their opposites are virtues to be actively encouraged and strengthened, like muscles that need to be toned up.<sup>48</sup>

Mindfulness enables the Buddhist practitioner to identify the various feelings (*vedanā*) that are experienced and to stop them giving rise to affective responses of craving, aversion and so forth. According to the Buddhist analysis, pleasant and painful feelings are reactions to contact with objects. The Buddhists claim that once contact with the object has occurred, the feeling experienced is not within our control. However, pleasant feelings normally arouse in us the craving to possess the object whereas unpleasant feelings give rise to aversion and hatred. It is precisely here that the mind can intervene by stopping the habitual responses of craving or aversion. These responses are strong dispositions, so it is difficult to change them. But the Buddhists contend that is possible to remove them over time through attentiveness and effort. In this sense, unlike feelings, craving and aversion are voluntary and, with sufficient mindfulness and self-restraint, one can stop them from arising. The challenge is to be sufficiently self-aware and mentally disciplined to do this. When successful, the Buddhist severs the link between feeling and craving or aversion and experiences detachment.<sup>49</sup> Recognising the impermanence of all feelings, he or she

<sup>46</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 415–420. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 524–526.

<sup>47</sup> *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* V, 34. Trans. Waldron, op. cit., p. 210.

<sup>48</sup> For example, see *Dhammapāda* XVII, 13. Trans. Narada Thera, *The Dhammapāda: Pali Text and Translation with Stories in Brief and Notes* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society, 1978, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn.), p. 196.

<sup>49</sup> For example, see *Samyutta Nikāya* III, 127. Trans. Bodhi, op. cit., p. 942.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

learns to respond to them with neither craving nor aversion, thus averting the consequent suffering.

### Therapy as Sensitive to Context

A good doctor varies the medicine in relation to the precise nature of the disease, and a similar flexibility is found in most Buddhist traditions. It is believed that the Buddha did not teach the same thing to all people but adapted his message depending on the specific needs, capacities and interests of his audience. We have already seen that this is the great advantage of oral communication between teacher and pupil; it allows the teacher to assess and respond to the requirements of the individual student.

In the Pāli scriptures there are numerous examples of this context-sensitivity of the Buddhist teaching. For instance, the *Udāna* recounts the story of the monk Nanda, who considers returning to lay life because of his infatuation with a beautiful woman. Attempting to dissuade Nanda from this course of action, the Buddha guarantees him ‘five hundred pink-footed nymphs’ as a reward if he remains a monk under the Buddha’s tutelage. Naturally enough, Nanda agrees. He subsequently realises *nibbāna* and thus no longer requires the Buddha to supply the promised nymphs. One is left wondering whether the Buddha had any intention of keeping his promise or whether he simply told a compassionate lie. The five hundred pink-footed nymphs could function here as a metaphor for the bliss of enlightenment, so superior to the sensual enjoyment that was enticing Nanda to renounce the monastic life. What is certain is that the story shows, in a particularly colourful fashion, the willingness of the Buddha to adapt his teachings as required by the situation.<sup>50</sup>

Another prominent example concerns the graduated teachings given to the laity and monastics, with the latter receiving higher teachings than the former. The usual presumption in Theravāda Buddhism is that lay followers will not seek enlightenment in this lifetime, but will work to ensure a good rebirth by living a good and just life in society and as family members. So, the Buddha gives instructions to the lay followers about living harmoniously by behaving with appropriate respect and consideration for other people. By contrast, the task of the monastics is to gain enlightenment, and thus sermons about the means for achieving this goal tend to be reserved for them. The *Netti Prakaraṇa* divides the

<sup>50</sup> *Udāna* 3.2. Trans. Ireland, op. cit., pp. 35–39.

*suttas* hierarchically into two primary types: those for the laity, dealing with the lower teachings about morality and those for the monastics, dealing with the higher teachings about insight.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, the Pāli scriptures identify various character types, notably, the type whose conduct is dominated by greed (*rāgacarita*) and the type whose conduct is dominated by hatred (*dosacarita*). Someone with a particularly strong propensity to greed will need a different therapeutic medicine than someone whose primary disposition is towards hatred and anger.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the practitioner who experiences strong lust may be directed to reflect on the loathsomeness of the human body or the decomposition of a corpse. By contrast, an appropriate therapy for someone dominated by aversion will be a meditation which aims to develop loving kindness or friendliness (*mettābhāvanā*).<sup>53</sup> The Buddha also distinguishes between the character type dominated by a greedy temperament (*rāgacarita*) and the character type dominated by a deluded temperament (*ditṭhacarita*). The therapy prescribed for the greedy temperament is ‘calming’ meditation (*samatha*), which quietens the mind through developing a highly concentrated and absorbed state of consciousness. For the deluded temperament, the Buddha prescribes insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, which entails systematic reflection on Buddhist truths such as impermanence.<sup>54</sup> While insight meditation is primarily aimed at combating ignorance the other major form of meditation, calming or tranquillity (*samatha*), works directly against forms of greed or craving:

If tranquillity is developed, what benefit does it bring? The mind becomes developed. And what is the benefit of a developed mind? All lust is abandoned. If insight is developed, what benefit does it bring? Wisdom becomes developed. And what is the benefit of developed wisdom? All ignorance is abandoned.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> George D. Bond, ‘The Gradual Path as a Hermeneutical Approach to the Dhamma,’ in Donald S. Lopez Jr. (ed.), *Buddhist Hermeneutics* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), pp. 29–45.

<sup>52</sup> De Silva, op. cit., p. 38. The discussion of character types becomes more elaborate and systematic in later texts. For example, see *Visuddhimagga* III, 74–133. Trans. Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 101–117.

<sup>53</sup> Étienne Lamotte, ‘The Assessment of Textual Interpretation in Buddhism’, in Lopez, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> De Silva, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>55</sup> *Āṅguttara Nikāya* II, iii, 10. Trans. Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Āṅguttara Nikāya* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1999), p. 42.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, this adaptability of the Buddhist therapy is developed into the explicit doctrine of 'skilful means' (*upāya-kausalya*). The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* claims that the Buddha uses various devices to guide people towards enlightenment; they will vary depending on the individual circumstances and aptitude. In a famous parable, the *sūtra* compares the Buddha to a father who seeks to rescue his sons from a burning house. To persuade them out of the house, the father entices them with a variety of desirable toys. Similarly, the Buddha uses a range of teachings to persuade unenlightened people to leave *samsāra*—a metaphorical burning house of craving and delusion—and achieve the safety of *nirvāṇa*. The Buddha does not teach the truth, or the whole truth, to all people. He teaches only what will be beneficial, remaining silent as an act of merciful discretion when he judges that the revelation of the truth will have a deleterious effect. Some people are not, or not yet, sufficiently receptive and robust for the disclosure of naked reality to be helpful to them. As Nāgārjuna says in the *Ratnāvalī*:

Just as a grammarian [first] makes  
His students read the alphabet,  
So Buddha taught his trainees  
The doctrines which they could bear.<sup>56</sup>

The malleability of the Buddhist therapy leads to considerable doctrinal diversity. This, in turn, creates a serious hermeneutical challenge: which of the myriad teachings of the Buddha represents his final view about reality and the highest form of cognitive therapy?

In order to address this problem, the *Catuhpratisaraṇa Sūtra* makes a distinction between teachings of the Buddha that are of interpretable meaning (*neyārtha*) and those that have a definitive meaning (*nītārtha*), interpretive categories that are employed in many traditions of Buddhism.<sup>57</sup> Teachings with a definitive meaning represent the Buddha's final view and thus can be taken literally. By contrast, teachings with an interpretable meaning are therapeutic skilful means; the Buddha taught them as pragmatic concessions to those who have not progressed far enough spiritually to receive the definitive teaching. They should not be taken literally and are often taught with an ulterior motive, namely, to prepare people to become receptive eventually to the definitive teaching.

<sup>56</sup> *Ratnāvalī* 394. Trans. Jeffery Hopkins, *The Precious Garland and The Song of the Four Mindfulnesses: Nāgārjuna and the Seventh Dalai Lama* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1975) p. 76.

<sup>57</sup> Lamotte, op. cit., pp. 16–23.

A common example of an interpretable teaching is the Buddha's reference to a self that, for instance, performs actions and is reborn in circumstances determined by its *karma*. There appear to be two prominent reasons why the Buddha sometimes gives this teaching. First, the Buddha does not literally mean that there is a real, single entity called the self; rather, he used this term as convenient shorthand for what is in reality an extremely complex web of mental and physical processes.<sup>58</sup> Second, the Buddha sometimes teaches the existence of the self or soul as an enduring entity that, in future lives, reaps the consequences of its action. This preparatory teaching is intended for hedonists and nihilists, who do not believe in *karma* and rebirth, in order to motivate them to live moral lives. It is only at a higher stage of the spiritual path that they will be able to comprehend that there is no such self but that this does not negate the need to lead an ethical life. In the meantime, it is better that such people lead moral lives motivated by the misconception that there is an eternal self that will be rewarded or punished.<sup>59</sup> These two justifications for the teaching of the self are different in an important respect. In the first case, the Buddha does not lie; rather, he intends that it should be understood that the language of the self is a pragmatic designation, not to be construed literally. In the second case, it appears that the Buddhist therapy can, in certain circumstances, entail telling benign untruths for the sake of the patient. We have already seen that this may also have been the case in the story of Nanda.

Unsurprisingly, there is considerable disagreement between the various types of Buddhism about which teachings have definitive status. For instance, writing from a Theravāda perspective, Buddhaghosa identifies the truths of impermanence, suffering, and selflessness as the definitive truths.<sup>60</sup> However, the Yogācāra tradition favours the teaching of mind-only (*cittamātra*) as definitive. Some Mādhyamikas criticise this Yogācāra claim, arguing that the mind-only teaching is interpretable and provisional. It is a therapeutic device taught to enable practitioners to relinquish their craving for external objects.<sup>61</sup> The definitive teaching is universal emptiness. Both Mādhyamikas and Yogācārins are able to claim scriptural backing for

<sup>58</sup> See *Milindapañha* 25–28. Trans. Thomas William Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda, Part I*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894), pp. 41–46.

<sup>59</sup> See Lamotte, op. cit., p. 21; Ganeri, op. cit., pp. 107–115.

<sup>60</sup> Donald S. Lopez Jr., 'On the Interpretation of the Mahāyāna Sūtras', in Lopez, op. cit., p. 62.

<sup>61</sup> See Lopez, op. cit., pp. 52–56, 69.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

their hermeneutical positions; the Mādhyamikas commonly rely on the *Akṣayamatīrdeśa Sūtra* which proclaims emptiness as definitive, whereas the Yogācārins look to the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra* to support their contention that the mind-only teaching is the highest truth. Furthermore, Buddhists strongly influenced by the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine will treat teachings about the Buddha nature as definitive, Hua yen Buddhists contend that the final teaching is of mutual interpenetration of all phenomena, as taught in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. And so on. As Donald Lopez points out, the notion that many Buddhist doctrines are skilful means is used not only as a way of accommodating the variety of teachings as each having therapeutic validity but also as a ‘hermeneutics of control’, whereby the views of rival Buddhist traditions can be conveniently subordinated to those of one’s own.<sup>62</sup>

A further complication occurs because some passages from various Buddhist texts appear to relegate all doctrinal formulations to the level of skilful means, declaring that they must all be relinquished eventually. For example, the *Atthakavagga* from the *Sutta Nipāta* seems to advocate that the enlightened person will hold no views whatsoever.<sup>63</sup> A similar claim is made by Nāgārjuna, who contends that he has no thesis (*pratijñā*) and that to treat emptiness as a view (*dṛṣṭi*) is a serious error.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the famous simile of the raft indicates that, like a raft used to cross a river, the *Dhamma* should be used for crossing to the far shore beyond the stream of birth and death (*samsāra*). Once one has reached the other side the *Dhamma*, like the raft, should be abandoned as it has fulfilled its purpose.<sup>65</sup> And Candrakīrti quotes approvingly a passage from the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra* which likens the Buddha’s teachings to a medicine that expels itself from the body as well as the poison that it removes.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Lopez, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> *Sutta Nipāta* 780–787. Trans. Kenneth R. Norman, *The Rhinoceros Horn and Other Early Buddhist Poems (Sutta Nipāta)* (London: Pali Text Society, 1985), p. 131.

<sup>64</sup> *Vigrahavyāvartanī* 29. Trans. Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn.), p. 113.

<sup>65</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I 134–135. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 228–229.

<sup>66</sup> *Prasannapadā* 83b–84a. Trans. Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 66–67. See also Christopher Gowans, this volume.

The interpretation of such passages is vexing. Taken at face value, they communicate that even the most profound Buddhist teachings about impermanence, insubstantiality and so forth fail to express adequately the way things really are. If one asserts that they are ultimately true, then one has fallen prey to a dogmatism that is inimical to the spirit of the Buddhist therapy. In effect, these passages collapse the distinction between interpretable and definitive teachings, for no teaching is in fact definitive. Even Buddhist right views of the highest order have a merely instrumental value, as means to achieving the end which is enlightenment. This is often coupled with the claim that the truth experienced in enlightenment is strictly inexpressible. In this case, even supposedly definitive Buddhist views are only true insofar as they are useful or therapeutic. It would appear to follow that the enlightened person will no longer assent to them as true, except perhaps as a means to help others achieve the same ineffable enlightenment. Once enlightenment has been achieved, these views lose their utility and thus their truth.

I do not wish to deny that some Buddhists do maintain this purely pragmatic understanding of all Buddhist views, and that this may be the intention of the cited passages. However, an alternative Buddhist position is that enlightenment does not entail giving up the views which, as various Buddhist sources claim, express the true nature of things in a definitive manner. Surely these right views are constitutive of enlightenment, rather than simply instruments for its attainment? And when they are useful, is not this because they are true, rather than vice versa? Indeed, Pāli sources describe the Buddha's enlightenment experience as an insight into, rather than the abandonment of, the four truths, dependent origination and so forth.<sup>67</sup> As Ganeri points out, the similes of the raft and the purgative medicine seem problematic, given that they imply that the truths expressed by Buddhist doctrine can be dispensed with once their therapeutic work has been done. He suggests the helpful alternative analogy of a man who flees from danger by climbing a large rock:

From the top, he is safe and has an excellent view. Should he then say to himself 'This rock has served me well, and now I can dispense with it? Obviously not. The point is that we might prefer a solid grasp of the truth as helping to sustain and maintain a person in a form of life, for example, the life of a sincere

<sup>67</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 247–250. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 340–343.



## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

Buddhist practitioner, rather than as functioning merely as a means to an end.<sup>68</sup>

So, the enlightened person would not give up definitive Buddhist doctrines, which are thought to be correct statements of the true nature of things. These doctrines are formulations of the truths—about impermanence, insubstantiality, the folly of craving, and so forth—to which the enlightened person is said to have become fully receptive, allowing them to reshape his or her entire cognitive and affective experience. They are not to be renounced; on the contrary, they are to be embraced and made to permeate one's every thought and action.

Perhaps, then, the raft and purgative medicine similes, and the 'no views' statements are best interpreted as not undermining the accuracy and truthfulness of definitive Buddhist doctrines, nor claiming that these teachings have a merely instrumental value and should be dispensed with once enlightenment has been attained. Rather, they are warnings that one should not get attached to these doctrines; they are pointing out that the way in which these doctrines are held is important. The enlightened person would assent to the truth of Buddhist views but without pride or arrogance. Buddhist scriptures warn against clinging to views as one of the impediments to enlightenment.<sup>69</sup> And right views as much as wrong views can be the focus of one's clinging. The purpose of the right view has been missed if one's understanding of it is a cause of self-satisfaction, or if one uses it to appear clever or superior to other people. Such a misguided attitude betrays the fact that one's sense of ego is still strong, and that one has not been genuinely affected by the therapeutic message expressed by the view, namely that craving and selfishness are to be given up.

### Critical Reflections

It would be inaccurate to accuse the Buddhist therapy of ignoring the significance of the body and its impact on one's psychology. Physical well-being is often viewed as a prerequisite for effective spiritual training, as exemplified by the Buddha's famous rejection of extreme forms of asceticism such as self-mortification. And early Buddhist sources devote considerable attention to medicines,

<sup>68</sup> Ganeri, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>69</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 63–68. Trans. Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.*, pp. 159–163.

physical exercises and dietetics.<sup>70</sup> They also commonly stress the interrelatedness of body and mind, an influence that cuts both ways.<sup>71</sup> Buddhaghosa likens the mind and body to two sheaves of reeds which rest against one another for mutual support.<sup>72</sup> In conjunction with traditions such as *Āyurveda* as well as Chinese and Tibetan medicine, Buddhism often *advocates* a holistic approach to physical illness and psychological difficulties.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, it does seem that there is a challenge to Buddhism in modern scientific claims that some emotions could be changed only by physiological intervention, such as drugs, and that belief and behavioural modification may have little or no role to play in these cases. If these claims are true, then Buddhism might be adapted to accommodate them, but, as far as I am aware, traditional Buddhism does not usually acknowledge that physical medicinal therapies rather than cognitive and behavioural therapies are required to overcome some unwholesome desires and emotions.

Another common criticism of the Buddhist therapy concerns its ultimate objective, that is, complete nonattachment.<sup>74</sup> As we have seen, the Buddhists stress that attachment causes unhappiness, and lies at the root of disturbing emotions such as fear, anger, jealousy and avarice. However, it is debatable whether a life of total nonattachment is really possible. Is it not more likely that enlightenment is an ideal that one may strive towards but never realise? Buddhist therapies may be effective in reducing attachment and ignorance, but it

<sup>70</sup> See Mark Tatz, *Buddhism and Healing: Demieville's Article 'Byō' from Hōbōgirin* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1985). See also Kenneth G. Zysk, *Asceticism and Healing in Ancient India: Medicine in the Buddhist Monastery* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998).

<sup>71</sup> See Peter Harvey, 'The Mind-Body Relationship in Pali Buddhism: A Philosophical Investigation' in *Asian Philosophy* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1993), pp. 29–41.

<sup>72</sup> *Visuddhimagga* XVIII, 32. Trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *op. cit.*, p. 614.

<sup>73</sup> For example, see C. Pierce Salguero, *Traditional Thai Medicine: Buddhism, Animism, Ayurveda* (Holm Press, 2007) and Theodore Burang, *The Tibetan Art of Healing* (London: Robinson and Watkins Books Ltd, 1974). For a contemporary perspective on the importance of the body for Buddhist practice, see Reginald A. Ray, *Touching Enlightenment: Finding Realization in the Body* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2008).

<sup>74</sup> For instance, Christopher Gowans, this volume.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

may seem unrealistic to believe that they can be forever eradicated. Yet Buddhist sources are replete with examples of people who are said to have achieved the goal of complete and irreversible enlightenment.

However, the apparent Buddhist optimism about the possibility of attaining complete wisdom needs to be seen in the context of frequent claims that it is extremely difficult and requires enormous effort. Moreover, it is usually maintained that enlightenment is the result of numerous lifetimes of endeavour, a process that is recorded, in the case of the historical Buddha, in many stories of his previous lives as an unenlightened Bodhisattva, working towards the attainment of wisdom. Thus, the Buddhists think that enlightenment is much more difficult and rare than might first seem to be the case. Moreover, there is a prevalent belief in various forms of Buddhism that we live in an age of decline, in which enlightenment by following the Buddhist therapeutic techniques is no longer achievable, because selfishness and ignorance have become too deep-rooted. In some Buddhist traditions, notably some of the Pure Land schools, this leads to the conviction that the traditional Buddhist therapies of mindfulness, ethical conduct, meditation and so forth have become ineffective. We can no longer achieve spiritual progress, let alone enlightenment, by our own efforts, and must rely on the saving grace of a celestial Buddha. A less extreme view is that the therapies are worth pursuing, but that, given the intractable nature of some of our attachments and ignorance, their transformative power has limitations. In the latter case, wisdom is always to be striven for but is unlikely to be attained in any final and complete sense. In this case, an important aim of therapy will be to encourage a realistic attitude of acceptance that one will have shortcomings and will not live up to one's ideals. Perhaps this is the highest wisdom that is attainable.

Whether or not the state of nonattachment is possible, it is also questionable whether the Buddhists are right to claim that it is desirable. It can be objected that the equanimous existence that Buddhism advocates sacrifices many of the desires and emotions which make life worth living—for example, the passion of the lover, sensual enjoyment in its manifold forms, the strong attachment and devotion to family and friends. A life without love, lust, grief, and anger may be calm and unperturbed but arguably it is also incomplete and emotionally impoverished. It is tempting to think that Buddhism has misdiagnosed the problem and perhaps even invented a disease that does not exist and for which, therefore, a cure is not required. The Buddhists' mistrust and devaluing of basic human instincts

appears to be an example of the life-denying asceticism so despised by Nietzsche.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps the Buddhist therapy makes us less than fully human, alienating us from beliefs, desires and emotions that make our lives meaningful.

Aristotle (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) is critical of the ideal of nonattachment on similar grounds. He claims that detachment does not lead to true human happiness and a genuinely fulfilled human existence is one 'rich in attachments to people and things outside the self—friendships, family loves, political ties, ties of certain sorts to possessions and property. Thus it is a life rich in possibilities for emotions such as love, grief, fear, and even anger.'<sup>76</sup> The self-sufficient and tranquil life of the Stoic, Epicurean or Sceptic, impervious to these emotions, may be relatively safe and secure, but sacrifices many of the things that make human life potentially so fulfilling. For Aristotle, the best human life is one that is always vulnerable to loss and requires good fortune, because many of the things on which happiness depends are to some extent beyond one's control. Bad luck can undermine human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). But it is better to take the risk of disappointment and separation and to experience the joys of appropriate attachments to family, friends and so forth, than to make oneself invulnerable through a therapy of nonattachment.<sup>77</sup>

On the one hand, the claim that attachments can enrich life enormously is hard to resist and probably accords with most people's 'common sense' intuitions. It is arguable that it is appropriate to value greatly things such as the love for a sexual partner and that of the parent for a child, the close bond with a friend, and the enjoyment of the delights of the senses. Indeed, the very fragility of these desires and emotions and their objects possibly contributes to their beauty and worth. On the other hand, the consequences of attachments can be devastating, which might give one reason to doubt the reliability of the dominant view. Bereavement and betrayal can shatter one's life, and attachments to tribe, race, country, ideology and territory often cause war and genocide. If we reflect seriously on the terrible suffering that attachments can cause, it is hard to dismiss outright the attraction of a life of nonattachment with its promise of peace and freedom from emotional vicissitudes.

<sup>75</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 95–97. See also Ansell Pearson, this volume.

<sup>76</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy Of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 42.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42–101.

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

A plausible alternative to the Buddhist position might be to condone attachments to certain things (for example, one's family) and in certain respects (for example, in moderation). Even if one rejects the ultimate Buddhist goal of complete nonattachment, the therapeutic exercises may prevent one from forming excessive or inappropriate attachments. These exercises may also be useful when dealing with the painful consequences of one's attachments. For instance, Buddhist-inspired reflections on impermanence and selflessness may ameliorate somewhat the suffering of loss; loving kindness meditation directed impartially towards all, including one's enemies, may help alleviate anger and hate. This can be the case even if one does not agree that a life without any attachments would be best. In other words, these therapeutic techniques can be of value even when divorced from the ideal of human perfection which they were originally intended to help one realise.

There is another way in which the Buddhist philosophical therapy may be thought to have important limitations. Its focus tends to be primarily on the inner changes in the individuals that are required to treat suffering. It can be objected, therefore, that Buddhism tends to neglect the role that broader problems play in causing human suffering. Buddhism strives to make the individual independent of material and economic factors by stopping the craving and attachment that one has for comfort, food, sex, wealth and so forth. Buddhists aim to withdraw from society rather than seeking to improve it. It might be objected that this is naïve, given that the individual's inner world of desires, emotions and beliefs is at least in part a product of the environment which he or she inhabits? Would not the Buddhist therapy be more effective if it turned its attention more to the social and economic conditions which shape individual attitudes?

The emphasis of Buddhist teachings has usually been placed on treating the individual rather than society, and this has led to accusations that the tradition has too little to say about solutions to social and political problems. Of course, one venerable Buddhist response is that such problems are inevitable given the nature of *samsāra*, and thus it is not naïve but realistic for the practitioner to concentrate his or her efforts on transcending rather than reforming this world of suffering. Thus, there is a stress in many forms of Buddhism on monasticism as a withdrawal from and renunciation of family and politics. But another response is that Buddhism has not always been and should not be silent on these issues. A central part of the Buddhist therapeutic treatment is to transcend selfishness by encouraging individuals to cultivate attitudes of loving kindness and compassion. The Buddhists think that we should extend our empathy and benevolence

to include as many others as possible.<sup>78</sup> This is an obligation which arguably should entail an interest in social and political improvements. And there are examples of Buddhist thinkers, such as Nāgārjuna, dispensing advice to rulers about how best to govern for the benefit of society as a whole.<sup>79</sup> The Buddha himself offers lay-people guidance on how to build a harmonious society through living in accordance with ethical precepts.<sup>80</sup> There is often recognition that supportive political and social conditions are required in order for the Buddhist teachings to be transmitted and practised effectively. As reputedly exemplified by Aśoka (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE),<sup>81</sup> rulers have sometimes sought to create societies governed in accordance with the ethical principles of the Buddha's teaching and in a way which supports the flourishing of the Buddhist community. Moreover, given the claim that there is no autonomous self, and that one's inner world is not separate from what lies outside it, it would seem to follow that Buddhists should recognise the influence of society on one's psychology. Nevertheless, it is fair to claim that this social aspect of the Buddhist therapy has been relatively undeveloped. Indeed, Buddhism has often tacitly or explicitly supported social injustice, discrimination, and the status quo. However, it is also the case that this deficiency is being addressed by the phenomenon widely referred to as 'socially engaged Buddhism'. Prominent recent Buddhists—including the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa, Thich Nhat Hanh and many others—have stressed in various ways the need to treat both the individual's ills and those of the wider society as they are mutually dependent. They contend that the ultimate aim of Buddhism may be liberation from *samsāra* but this does not preclude the Buddhist from, in the meantime, endeavouring to make *samsāra* less painful and more conducive to the practice of Buddhism through addressing issues such as injustice, lack of education and poverty. They draw on and adapt central Buddhist teachings—such as those about interconnectedness, selflessness, compassion, giving, right livelihood and so forth—to develop social

<sup>78</sup> See *Sutta Nipāta* 143–152. Trans. Norman, op. cit., pp. 24–25; *Visuddhimagga* IX, 295–315. Trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, op. cit., pp. 288–308; *Bodhicaryāvatāra* X, 1–58. Trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton, op. cit., pp. 138–143.

<sup>79</sup> *Ratnāvalī* 301–400. Trans. Hopkins, op. cit., pp. 62–77.

<sup>80</sup> *Dīgha Nikāya* III, 180–193. Trans. Walshe, op. cit., pp. 461–469.

<sup>81</sup> See Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 1997, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn.).

therapies that admittedly go far beyond anything done or said by the Buddha himself.<sup>82</sup>

There is a final question that needs to be addressed: To what extent is Buddhist therapy open to the charge of indoctrination, which compromises rather than develops the students' powers of critical reasoning? This is not a question to which a simple answer can be provided, given the sheer diversity of Buddhism and of Buddhists. But it is undeniable that Buddhist therapy does in some of its forms emphasise the power of the received wisdom of the exalted teacher (*guru*) in which the student must have faith. Indeed, it may be argued that this dependence on the *guru* is entailed by Buddhist teaching – if we are ignorant, then surely this applies to our thinking and reasoning processes, or at least to the way in which we put these to use. So why would one rely on these rather than the guidance of an enlightened teacher? Hence faith and trust play a vital role in many forms of Buddhist therapy.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, techniques such as rote memorisation and recitation of key doctrines are often employed at the expense of genuine critical engagement and questioning. If alternative views are considered, the intention sometimes seems to be only to assert the assumed superiority of the Buddhist position. Buddhist sources often give the impression that there can be no doubt about the efficacy of the Buddhist methods and the desirability of the goal of non-attachment. To this extent, it seems that Buddhism and philosophy do part company.

An important source in this context is the Buddha's famous advice to the Kālāma people of Kesaputta. He teaches them that the *Dhamma* should be accepted only 'when you know for yourselves'. It is interesting that this sermon explicitly rejects the ultimate authority of reasoning in favour of an experiential form of knowledge.<sup>84</sup> If the intention here is that one should rely only on one's own experiences and not at all on reasoning, then this passage seems to support the objection that Buddhism does not give sufficient attention to rational reflection. Of course, there are many problems with such epistemic dependence on personal experiences, especially when divorced from any rational scrutiny. For instance, there are the possibilities of delusion, self-deception and that the experiences may

<sup>82</sup> See Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> I am grateful to Clare Carlisle for this insight.

<sup>84</sup> *Āṅguttara Nikāya* III, 65. Trans. Thera and Bodhi, op. cit., pp. 64–67. It is interesting that this sermon also warns against reliance on the words of one's teacher.



be strongly conditioned by the Buddhist training that one undertakes and thus themselves a product of indoctrination.

However, a more charitable reading is that in this source the Buddha is teaching that one should not rely purely on reasoning, because such rational examination needs to be complemented and confirmed by experiential verification. Reasoning on its own, unsupported by experience, can lead one into many distracting and speculative views that may or may not be true and have little bearing on the task of overcoming suffering. Questioning and rational testing of Buddhist claims is a component of the Buddhist training but there is a danger of overvaluing it at the expense of the experiential.<sup>85</sup> But experiences unscrutinised by reason are also unreliable. So, critical, rational assessment may be insufficient but is nonetheless a necessary requirement before one should fully assent to the *Dhamma*. Hence there are developed traditions of debate in some forms of Buddhism.<sup>86</sup> The *Bodhisattvabhūmi* declares that it is reasoning which ensures that one confronts truths and does not 'deviate from the meaning of reality.'<sup>87</sup> And Śantarākṣita (8<sup>th</sup> century CE) quotes the Buddha as having said that his words should be accepted 'after due investigation' rather than out of respect for him 'just as gold is accepted as true only after heating, cutting and rubbing.'<sup>88</sup>

In the contemporary Japanese Buddhist movement referred to as 'Critical Buddhism,' scholars such as Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō have argued provocatively that the rational pursuit of truth is the heart of Buddhism. They contend that Buddhist traditions which have been authoritarian and unquestioning have departed from the genuine message of Buddhism.<sup>89</sup> Of course, this attempt to identify a single, authentic Buddhist attitude to reasoning is problematic. Nevertheless, the frequent Buddhist recommendation not to be attached to the Buddhist teachings might be

<sup>85</sup> For further discussion, see Gunapala Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* (Antioch: Golden Leaves Publishing, 1988), pp. 254–258.

<sup>86</sup> For example, see Dan Perdue, *Debate in Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1992).

<sup>87</sup> *Bodhisattvabhūmi* 257. Trans. Lamotte, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>88</sup> *Tattvasaṃgraha* 3588. Trans. Ganganatha Jha, *The Tattvasaṃgraha of Śantarākṣita with the Commentary of Kamalashīla* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), p. 1558.

<sup>89</sup> See Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson (eds), *Pruning the Bodhi Tree. The Storm over Critical Buddhism*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

## Curing Diseases of Belief and Desire

construed as requiring a reasoned receptivity to alternative points of view and, consequently, a willingness to modify or even relinquish the Buddhist views if they are demonstrated to be lacking. Non-dogmatic practitioners might deny that the Buddhist claims about the ultimate truth, and how to achieve wisdom, are incontrovertible.

At the beginning of this chapter, I raised the question whether the Buddhist therapy can rightly be considered as philosophy. If philosophy involves the exercise of critical, rational reflection in the pursuit of human fulfilment, then it seems that non-dogmatic Buddhists might engage with the Buddhist therapy in a recognisably philosophical manner. They would continually question and test the efficacy and truthfulness of the teachings and be receptive to the possibility that further enquiry and experience may require revision of the therapy and its truth claims.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> I would like to thank Clare Carlisle, Shaun Davies, Jonardon Ganeri and Christopher Gowans for their extremely valuable comments on earlier versions of this chapter.