Buddhism: Putting Suffering to Work for Wellness - Psychophysical and Spiritual

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I Introduction

It is interesting how the world changes! When Buddhism was first discovered by the west, it was condemned as a negative, gloomy religion. The Buddha talked of 'suffering' as a reality! But today, nurses, doctors and other health professionals, chaplains and ministers, not to mention the average person, consistently talk of their concern for alleviating suffering! So perhaps Buddhism has a minor contribution to make to this very timely conference on "The Spiritual Dimensions of Health: a Transcultural Approach".

In talking about illness and wellness from the Buddhist point of view, let me begin by noting that one of the epithets of the Buddha (circa 543 B.C.) is 'The Great Physician'.

This is no accidental epithet when we consider the fact that all of the Buddha's teachings for 45 years after experiencing Enlightenment was directed at alleviating 'suffering' (see Part I for a clarification of the concept). Indeed he uses a medical analogy in encouraging the practice of the dhamma (his teachings). He urges the practitioner to consider

the teacher as a doctor,
oneself as being sick,
the teaching as medicine, and
the practice of the teaching as treatment.

It will be the task of this paper, then, to explore some of these teachings that can serve as treatment towards wellness.

I shall begin by outlining what 'suffering' means from the Buddhist point of view. Then I shall try to point out how suffering can be turned on its head to be used as a launching pad towards both physical and spiritual wellness, which from the Buddhist point of view could be one and the same. 'Letting go' through meditation, will be shown as the process in making this turnaround. Finally, we shall outline some practical applications of theory.
II SUFFERING DEFINED AND EXPLORED

a. The three meanings of dukkha

Buddha's very first teaching, following Enlightenment, is characterized in terms of Four Noble Truths, the first of which is contained in the term dukkha. The term is used here in the original Pali language because there is no single English equivalent to cover its three meanings. Let us therefore understand its three (levels of) meaning.

1. Dukkha as suffering.

At the very basic level, dukkha means 'ordinary suffering' - illness, separation, loss, death, birth, etc. Engler, a Harvard psychologist and Buddhist meditation practitioner (1986:46) puts it in more technical terms: dukkha as corresponding to "neurotic conflict between impulse and prohibition within a stable self-structure and whole-object relations".

II. Dukkha as resulting from change.

At the second level, dukkha corresponds to what Engler (ibid.) characterizes as the "borderline conditions and the functional psychoaesthesia". Such dukkha is experienced due to one's fluctuating drives and affects, contradictory and dissociated ego stages, and a difficulty in maintaining constant relations with the object world; in short, due to an instability in the sense of one's own self-structure and continuity. It is the constant change, then, that is the cause of suffering.

III. Dukkha as 'conditioned states'.

The third meaning of dukkha is more complex. Contradictory as it may sound, it is the very success in developing a stable self-structure (="conditioned state") that serves as the condition for suffering! In other words, what we call normalcy is actually a pathology, or "an arrested development" (ibid.). The illness arises because of our clinging to an erroneous conceptualization of reality - an unchanging self, a self-identity that we label I, soul, ego and so on.

b. Sources of dukkha

1. Soullessness as reality.

If the Buddha's First Noble Truth is dukkha, the Second deals with its source. This is ignorance, or a lack of understanding of 'reality as it is', this being the translation of the Buddha's term for 'knowledge'. This reality, Buddha insists, is change.

To understand this concept of 'change', we have to go to the Buddha's characterization of the human person, as contained in his metaphysical teachings, called the Abhidhamma 6.
His term for the human person, literally translated, is 'psychophysique' (nāma-rūpa). A detailed outline of this mind-matter concatenation I have given elsewhere (Sugunasiri, 1990). For our purposes, we shall outline only its relevant aspects.

The psychophysique, by definition, is made up of two dimensions: the psychological and the physical, in a necessary relationship. By 'necessary' is meant that one does not exist without the other, and the absence of one ensures the absence of the other (Jayatilleka, 1963)7.

The psychological is divided into 'consciousness' and 'mental properties'. Consciousness is further divided into 4 types, only one being of the human domain. Mental properties are made up of 'universals' (7), shared by all sentient beings (including animals)8, and 'particulars' (45) that are variable across individuals. Particulars are divided into 'moral', 'immoral' and 'amoral'.

The physical aspect is made up of the 'essentials' and their 'derivatives'. By the former are meant the elements of extension, cohesion, heat/cold and motion9. The latter includes some we generally think of as being physical, such as the sense organs, heart-base, life-organ and femininity/masculinity and others which we would not ordinarily see as being physical: nutrition, communication and changeability.

The fundamental notion arising from this refined analysis is that neither the physical nor the psychological, separately or in combination, has in any sense a tangible reality or permanence. All we have is process. Indeed the Pali word for matter, rūpa, from the root rup 'to break up', captures this.

The psychophysique analysis, then, shows that the reality in relation to the sentient being can only be characterized in terms of an absence of anything like an I, identity, ego or soul. This is the teaching of anatta 'soulessness' (see Rahula, 1959, for an elaboration).

11. Ignorance as basis of dukkha and illness.

While, then, at the 'absolute truth' level impermanence (and soulessness) is the reality, at the 'relative truth' level10 we see permanence in everything.

A chair we would say, e.g., is made up of a seat, legs, armrest and a back. But a carpenter would say that it is made up of pieces of wood, put together with nails and screws. And the scientist? She would say that a chair is made up of finer ingredients - called matter.

Likewise, while at the surface level we would see the human body in terms of the head, arms, legs, and so on on the outside, and
brain, heart, lungs, etc. on the inside, a physician would see it in terms of systems: musculoskeletal, circulatory, etc. But a physicist would see each of the parts as being made of atoms and molecules, photons and neutrons, etc.

It is the fact that we take reality at face value (ignorance) - without rigorous investigation - then, that leads to dukkha (and, as we shall see, to illness), in both the psychological and the physical domains, given the necessary relationship between the two (adhas).

Why and how this happens we turn to next.

iii. 'Thirst' as outcome of ignorance.

Our ignorance of reality, the Buddha explains, leads to a 'thirst' (tanha), which is of three kinds:

1. the thirst of the senses (i.e., both attraction to pleasure and aversion to pain);
2. the thirst to be (e.g., to go on living or to be born); and
3. the thirst not to be (e.g., to put an end to the life-cycle).

These fundamental thrist/...s, in turn, serve as the basis for other everyday and mundane thirsts. The child gets a toy, and soon tired of it, wants another. The addict goes for a double dosage, or more frequent dosage. You and I want to get more money, or a promotion, or even to finish the work on time so we can get to something else. The yuppie kills herself to get her first jaguar, but soon, one is not enough. The pianist who masters Beethoven's symphony no. 1 in A major now wants to master the next and the next and the next.

It could be argued that wanting a promotion or seeking love (carnal or other) are natural for life to keep going. This is indeed true, but this is still to yearn, and to agree to enrol in a suffering maintenance program. It is, then, important to note that yearning for the so-called positive is as bad as aversion to the so-called negative.

So yearning begets yearning.

c. Summation of nature and source of dukkha

The dukkha analysis then allows us to arrive at the following premises in relation to illness and wellness:

1. Illness can be understood in two related ways:
   1. Psychologically speaking, illness results from
      1.1 A lack of self-identity which brings about
      a disequilibrium, and/or
1.2 the development of a self-identity which brings about a false sense of self.

2. Mechanistically speaking, natural illness results from the imperfections that occur in the very process of the material essentials and their derivatives breaking up, reconstituting themselves, exiating, and breaking up again. After all, there is no God in Buddhism in charge of the operation! Such imperfections could be in either or both of the psychological and the physical domains;

11. Given the necessary relationship between the physical and the psychological, every illness, whatever the origins is ultimately psychological. Indeed the Buddha teaches that

Reality it is that the mind is forerunner, chief,
reality it is for everything to be mind-based...

(Dhammapada)

111. Given the moral, immoral and amoral dimensions of our mental properties, illness is in a range with wellness. That is to say that by our very nature, there is a certain amount of both wellness and illness in each of us. Indeed the Buddha says that "all non-saintly beings (that's all of us!) are deranged!" Erich Fromm would agree (see his The Sane Society).

III. TURNING DUKKHA ON ITS HEAD TOWARDS PSYCHOPHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL WELLNESS

If ignorance is at the bottom of suffering and illness, then wisdom, or the understanding of reality at the absolutest level (see fn.16) can be said to be the basis of wellness. Wisdom, from the Buddhist point of view, has not only a cognitive component, but a non-cognitive, or intuitive, component as well (Jayatilleka. op.cit.). It is this intuitive avenue that we suggest that can help us gain an understanding of reality through personal realization, leading to wellness and a transformation of consciousness.

But how? To this we turn now.

a. Reality through meditation

The Buddha gained an understanding of reality through the intense practice of meditation, for six long years. It is to this same meditation, then, that we need to turn to in our search for wellness as well.
What then is meditation? When we say, "Let's meditate on it", we mean that we want to reflect upon something. At this level, we are simply paying a bit more attention, spending a little more time than we would normally do on a given topic.

The nature of the body as we know is to stay put. We have to make an effort to move it. The nature of the mind, on the other hand, is to run all over. So the first step in meditation is to make a conscious effort to stop it from running. This, in fact, is both the goal and the process in meditation.

But first we need something to focus on. The easiest here is our very primal life force: breathing.

Buddhists believe in practice and not talk. So instead of my trying to describe meditation, let me at this point invite you to join me in the practice of meditation.

What we are going to practise I call 'compassion meditation', because not only do we seek to tame our mind, but we actively seek to develop our compassion as well as we gain better insight into reality. This is based on the understanding that the highest wisdom is part compassion and the highest compassion is part wisdom. Though compassion meditation is particularly Buddhist, it is hoped that the practice is not offensive to the sensibilities of any religion/philosophy.

Before we continue our theoretical flight, let us talk a bit about our experience.

b. Everyday meditation

Let me at this point emphasize that we need not think of meditation exclusively as something we do only in a quiet place at 6 in the morning! We can practice meditation practically every moment of our lives.

The Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, resident in France, but with a following in the US and Canada, can be very helpful here.

Let's take what he calls 'telephone meditation' (Karuna, 6:2). Here he suggests that instead of rushing to pick up the phone when it rings the first time, we could take a deep breath and exhale, watching the process. With the second ring, a smile, being mindful of the smile. With the third, extend your loving compassion to the caller. Now when you answer at the 4th ring, with your
copassionate mind, you are calm. Not only can you now interact with the caller calmly, or deal with the situation calmly, you may even have a calming influence on the caller!

Let us see how good we are at acting!

Go through the motions of phone meditation.

Now how about some 'carrot-peeling meditation'? As you peel your carrot, you say to yourself,

"Breathing in, I calm myself; breathing out, I peel the carrot."

You can see that Thich Hahn's carrot-peeling meditation can be applied to literally any situation - cooking meditation, laundry meditation, art meditation, and so on.

A writer I read recently, in fact, goes for ski-meditation!

Driving meditation is easy. As you drive, be aware of the different things you do: I'm now holding the steering wheel, now I'm turning it to the right, I'm pressing the pedal lightly/hard, I am applying my brakes, I see some tall buildings, etc. But you'll always have another part of your mind on the overall situation, just as you are aware of the physical and other contexts you are in when you are on the phone or peeling carrots.

Now to some sex meditation! Mind you, from the Buddhist point of view, sex is simply another act: no sin, no guilt, no shame, but simply consequences. If you think sex meditation preposterous, I would like you to consider that eating meditation has been used as treatment for obesity: simply being conscious of the act of eating gives you more psychological satisfaction!

What we just talked about, and practised earlier, is what has been characterized as 'concentration meditation' (samatha bhāvanā). This is only one kind of meditation that can train our mind to cut through the layers of ignorance or give us insight into the inner workings of our mind 'Insight meditation' (vipassanā bhāvanā), which has its own techniques (see again Odier or Ghanaponika), is the other, suitability of each type depending on the personality type.

c. Psychophysical and spiritual wellness as joint outcomes of meditation

Meditation facilitates healing because it helps us concentrate on the process, forgetting the content, of the mind: the ball game, tomorrow's work, anger at your spouse, the nagging pain, or whatever. As one continues to practice, we begin to gradually let go of ourselves, as some of us may have experienced today, more
and more. Now we might not actually see in the mind's eye the breaking-up and the reconstituting of matter and energy, or in fact 'experience the absence', to put it in zen terms, of a soul. But at least it helps develop a pliability of mind.

Given the necessary connection between the mind and the body, mental pliability now serves as a condition (see fn. 4) for physical pliability. It is this psychosocial pliability, then, that helps in the (self-)healing process, because it allows us to get an increasingly better understanding of the basis of our unwellness - the reality of dukkha in its three meanings (supra).

Now, as any student of Buddhism would note, it is this same understanding that the Buddha lists as one of the steps of the Noble Eightfold Path to liberation, as shown below broken down to its threefold aspect:

**Wisdom:**
- Excellence in understanding
- Excellence in thought

**Self-discipline:**
- Excellence in Language
- Excellence in action
- Excellence in livelihood
- Excellence in effort

**Concentration:**
- Excellence in mindfulness
- Excellence in concentration

The wisdom gained through excellence in understanding and in thought serves as a condition for self-discipline in everyday life, which in turn serves as a condition for concentration, taking us back to understanding.

So we see that meditation can help us not only in our psychosocial healing but also in nurturing the intrinsic Buddha-nature in us, remembering our moral dimension (supra). As our moral dimension grows, our immoral dimension comes to be underdeveloped in the same process, eventually bringing us liberation, nirvana.

It is thus we can say that we can turn suffering on its head to be put to work for our psychosocial and spiritual wellness. For it was our attempt to understand the bases of our suffering that led to wellness.

III. Personal wellness as condition for quality care

The ability to cope with one's own illness and the developing compassion now helps cope with the illness of those in our care better. First we begin to realize that both we, the care-givers, and our patients/clients, are co-sufferers, strung along a continuum. The new partnership of equals allows us to let go of the traditional professional-client/patient relationship. It now becomes easier to combine our technical professionalism with our 'spiritual professionalism'. Underlying this is the notion that
the quality of health care one gives is very much a function of the care-giver's own state of wellness.

How does all this help you Monday morning? The care-giver begins the day with meditation before getting to work. Now your mind is supple and compassionate. As soon as you get in, Mrs. Patrick rings a bell. You take a deep breath, following it as it comes in and goes out, allow your face to reflect the compassion in your heart by adorning your face with a smile.

As you reach Mrs. Patrick, she, having had a bad night, showers scorn at you. The balanced mind allows you to keep your cool, and further encourages you to ask yourself the question: who or what should I get angry at? Does it make sense to get angry at words that are mere sounds? Meditation upon the psychophysique analysis reminds you that what you see are essential elements and their derivatives, not Mrs. Patrick. So you ask yourself whether it makes sense to get angry at atoms and molecules, or energy bundles, which will have died and born again by the time you have begun to express your anger!

But suppose you still see Mrs. Patrick in her totality, you see her as one who has not been able to contain her immoral side. Your compassion would hardly allow you to get angry at someone who is a fellow-struggler. So you consider it your responsibility to extend your compassion, not mere sympathy, to help her reach out to her Buddha-nature. All this while, of course, you would be aware of your own breathing as you attend to whatever is necessary, with the other half of the mind.

With such a mind set, you are now ready for what I call 'treating meditation', whether you are a nurse, doctor, social worker, psychologist or any other type of care-giver. This is simply to be aware of every step: taking the needle, piercing the skin, pushing the syringe; or holding the stethoscope, placing it on the chest, listening actively to the heart beat, etc., being as compassionate and calm as possible.

All this would obviously work best on a good day! And, it is, no doubt, hard work to make that good day an every day. But the consolation price is that it all results in self-healing as well, through a process of psychic osmosis.

IV TIBETAN MEDICINE AS EXAMPLE OF BUDDHIST APPROACH TO HEALING

If all of this sounds utopian and impractical, let me now introduce you to Tibetan medicine, characterized as "a complex interweaving of religion, mysticism, psychology, and rational medicine" (Clifford, op. cit.:7).

It will be remembered that suffering in Buddhist understanding is based on ignorance of reality. Consider what the major Tibetan medical work, The Ambrosia Healing Tantra, tells of illness:
There is but one cause for all illness, and this is ignorance due not to understanding the meaning of identitylessness. For example, even when a bird soars in the sky, it does not part from its shadow. (Likewise) even when all creatures live and act with joy, because they have ignorance, it is impossible for them to be free of illness (underline added) (op.cit.6).

Tibetan medicine and psychiatry (see Clifford, op. cit.) dates back to the 8th century AD. It is a comprehensive system of patient care, made up of different specializations (e.g., pediatrics, gynaecology), scientific analyses (e.g., embryology, physiology, illness types), methods of examination (e.g., pulse, urine), treatment practices (e.g., moxibustion, acupuncture, surgery, emetics, dietary rules) and pharmacology (herbs, decoctions, elixirs). Perhaps there is a lesson here for us in North America in the 20th century.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me conclude by summarizing what I have been saying so far:

a. Suffering is of three types: ordinary suffering, suffering due to an inability to cope with change, and suffering due to a false sense of self.

b. Suffering is conditioned by our thirsts, cravings, desires.

c. Such thirsts are due to a lack of understanding of reality.

d. Developing a better understanding of reality is the way to get rid of our thirsts.

e. Letting go is the way to do this, and meditation is the medium.

f. Through meditation, suffering can be made to work for psychophysical and spiritual wellness.

g. Healing yourself is the best way of ensuring that those in your care get the best from you.

h. Good medicine must take into serious consideration not only the psychological and the physical, but the metaphysical as well.

If at the beginning you didn't think life was suffering, I am sure I've convinced you of it, listening to me!

Thank you very much.
NOTES


2. 'Mahaparinibbana Discourse', cited in Clifford, ibid.

3. Pali is the language in which the Buddha's words were first codified circa lat C. BC.

4. The corresponding Pali terms are dukkha-dukkhā, dukkha-viparināma and samkhāra-dukkha (samaññehi).

b. The details of dukkha are contained in the teaching of 'Conditioned Origination' (patiscka samuppada). The concept is that every event in nature results from the coming together of several factors (multiconditionality), all of which are in a circular and reciprocal relationship, with no beginning or end (see Ramula, 1959, for an elaboration).

5. The respective Pali terms are avijja (ignorance), yathā bhūta gnāna dassana (reality) and anicca (change).

6. The Buddha's teachings are collected in a Tricondumium (Tipitaka) (popularly, 'Three Baskets') made up of 38 books, nearly 15 times the length of the Bible. They are organized into three collections (pitakas). The Sutta Pitaka includes the discourses for the laity, the Vinaya Pitaka the rules of discipline for the ordained men and women (sangha) and the Abhidhamma Pitaka the metaphysical teachings.

7. The relationship envisaged here is not therefore the Cartesian one of chance or accident where 'you' could have my body and 'I' could have your mind.

8. In Buddhism, human beings are on the same phylogenetic scale with animals, both falling under the term sattva 'being'.

9. The Buddhist term for atom is kalapā meaning 'bundle', suggesting that Buddha understood the sub-atomic nature of reality.

10. The Buddha's terms are paramatthā (absolute) and sat ākkha (relative) sacca (truth) (Jayatilleka, 1956). The notions of relative and absolute truth must also be seen as being relative except at the very fundamental level. For example, to understand the human person as a system of systems is an 'absolute' truth when compared to the relative truth level of understanding it as simply a unit made up of a head, hands, legs, etc. But this 'absolute truth' becomes a relative truth when we see the more fundamental units of atoms and molecules as making up the human person, which in turn becomes a relative truth as research helps us understand the human person in terms of DNA and energy bundles. All this is not the same as understanding.

11. Consider here Freud's eros and thanatos.

12. This is drawn from the Dhammapada, one of the books in the Tipitaka (supra). The verse runs as follows:

Through love alone they cease.

This is an eternal reality.

13. Prince Siddhatta Gotama, the future Buddha, left his palace at the age of 29, leaving behind wife and one-day old son. Then going to all the pre-eminent teachers of the time, and not being satisfied, he went on his own way to find his own answer to his query, life. It is his final experience of