

Psychoanalysis and Buddhism: Paths of Disappointment

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I'd like to begin with a vignette. A little over 20 years ago, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Galwang Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and thought by many to be next in importance to the Dalai Lama in Buddhist culture, lay dying of cancer in a Chicago hospital. He is said to have refused pain killers, yet he astonished his nurses with his presence, kindness, and compassion (Goldstein, 2003). Just as he died, his attendants reported that his last words were, "Nothing happens." In this chapter, I'd like to discuss the relevance of this simple statement through personal experience. I entered the field of psychoanalysis with the highest of hopes. It was the end of the exciting 1960s, I was in my early 20s, was new to New York, and was determined to shed a constrained, self-conscious identity. Although at the time I was in another occupation, psychoanalysis seemed like a natural fit for me and, after a couple of years of analysis, I entered social work school, psychoanalytic training, and faced the future with new excitement and optimism.

The years rolled on and, although my schooling seemed to be progressing quite well and my analysis—conducted by a brilliant, exciting, and charismatic analyst—was always interesting, I still found myself uttering a familiar refrain to myself. It took a variety of forms, but its essence was something like this: "Sometime, after some more analysis, I'll be as smart as my analyst," or "a better athlete," or "a more desirable lover." What these statements had in common was the notion of my becoming more *something* than I was in the present—internally a combination of more confident, more relaxed, and more accomplished, and externally more revered by others. Given that the content of these fantasies varied, I was not aware that the core thought was being endlessly repeated.

After about ten years, my personal and professional circumstances called into question the validity of this path and I retreated

from the psychoanalytic world. It was at roughly this same time that I was introduced to Tibetan Buddhism and meditation practice. That path began to make much more sense to me than psychoanalysis and my allegiance shifted. I left analytic work altogether, moved to a mediation center in Colorado, and became a committed Buddhist practitioner. Eventually, I returned to psychoanalytic work, but I continued my meditation practice and my involvement in the Buddhist community in Boulder.

After several years of meditation practice I began to notice an all too familiar refrain creeping into my meditation. Once again, I found myself thinking that if I continued to meditate, "sometime, after more meditation, I'll become as smart as my meditation instructor," or "a better athlete," or "a more desirable lover," and so on. I eventually realized that I had returned to my former wishful thinking. Although the content of the thoughts and fantasies typically referenced the future, I had learned a fundamental lesson in analysis—as Freud (1923/1989) noted, whatever thoughts and fantasies were occurring in the room were of the present. In Buddhism, I had also learned that whatever arises in the mind has the nature of nowness (Trungpa, 2004).

It was clearly time to explore what information these hopes and fantasies of the future provided about the present. I concluded that fantasizing myself in a different position, state of mind, or circumstance implied that I was less than satisfied with my present state of mind, emotion, and being. And that implied some state of disappointment. Furthermore, I realized that over time, neither psychoanalysis nor Buddhist meditation had offered any particular cure for disappointment. I was spending just as much time fantasizing about the future now as I had when I began following the paths of analysis and meditation. It was hard to acknowledge that it had taken so many years to understand and face this seemingly simple truth.

I decided that it might be useful to view disappointment in context of Freud's pleasure principle (Freud, 1920/1961). We know that it is natural to seek and imagine situations that might result in greater comfort or in reduced internal tension, with the classic example being that of a person stuck on a desert island who fantasizes about a good meal. From the time a baby cries to expresses its response to discomforts such as being hungry, wet, or cold and a parent responds with the appropriate remedy, humans learn to fantasize about the things that will make them comfortable or reduce their internal tension. As we mature, this process increases greatly in complexity and subtleness. Society provides events and circumstances that raise our anxiety and tension while simultaneously promising remedies that can reduce it. In a materially focused culture such as ours, we are bombarded with information about a variety of products and activities that will allegedly make us more

comfortable. The increase in ambient stimulation and tension in society over the past 50 to 100 years has been much greater than the human body's ability to acclimate to it, spurring a new urgency for securing relief. As the ambient level of tension rises, that tension becomes manifest in a variety of symptoms and behaviors. People tend to embrace activities or products that promise relief, from buying material goods to turning to alcohol, legal and illegal drugs, exercise, and perhaps even psychotherapy or meditation. In fact, mainstream psychotherapy is moving strongly toward a focus on symptom relief as its primary objective.

The dilemma is that if these panaceas provide any relief at all, it is usually transitory. In a recent article in the *New York Times* entitled "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness," Jon Gertner (2003) describes research conducted by a group of psychologists and economists in the area of affective forecasting—the notion that virtually all of the decisions we make are based on our prediction of the emotional consequences of those events. The research showed that we are not very good emotional forecasters. What we imagine will make us happy probably will not make us as happy as we had imagined and the effects will be short-lived. In an article in *Psychology Today*, titled "Great Expectations," Polly Shulman (2004) emphasized something most of us know from experience—that the "ideal mate" does not exist. This notion is usually some projection of what we *think* will make us content. Writings espousing these notions seem to be appearing more frequently of late, perhaps a natural response to the increasing emphasis on comfort and relief in the culture.

So, if we do not pursue an external solution to our internal state of dissatisfaction or disappointment, what alternatives do we have? What happens if, as in psychoanalysis or Buddhist meditation, we are directed to study our own internal states, moment by moment? What seems to come into focus is a state of disappointment that may initially be experienced as hunger, fear, anxiety, tension, loss, sadness, or some other distressing feeling. In a culture largely driven by promises of solutions to uncomfortable states, it is deeply frustrating to spend years in analysis or a meditation practice only to discover, in the words of the 16th Karmapa, that "nothing happens."

Why engage in such often expensive and time-consuming yet disappointing activities? Here we might turn to the notion of addiction as it becomes more widespread in the culture. Although it is common to think of addiction in material terms, the list of other kinds of addictive behaviors, such as sexual addiction, exercise addiction, relationship addiction, and so on is growing. To break free of any form of addiction, one must go through a withdrawal process that can be both painful and lengthy. Recent neuropsychological research has supported the enduring Freudian concept of repetition compulsion, as it has become apparent

that addictive processes are woven into our brains from our experiences (Siegal, 2007).

In fact, the cinematic experience in our present culture clearly reflects the overwhelming availability of diverse, intense simulative forces. Which of you readers has been to a movie lately and not felt bombarded by the emotionally explosive excess of the trailers for coming attractions, never mind the movie you came to see? Few among us can imagine life without cell phones, computers, television, and other modern electronic stimulants that did not exist a short time ago. No sooner do we purchase one of these technological wonders than it becomes obsolete, with the next generation of gadgets providing even more complex stimulation. In a very interesting and entertaining book titled *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, James Gleick (2000) describes more than thirty areas of stimulation that have seen exponential acceleration in recent years.

When considering life without the everyday stimulants we have come to take for granted, it is instructive to monitor our emotions when one of these agents of stimulation is suddenly unavailable to us. Think about how you feel when the phone does not work, the TV breaks, the power goes out, a friend cancels an appointment, or another source of stimulation is withdrawn. We might say that we are disappointed, but physiologically or emotionally what we experience might actually be akin to withdrawal. Rather than accept the unexpectedly empty space or time in our lives, our need for constant stimulation often leads us to quickly find an alternative source. We might decide to head out for a neighborhood bar, call someone else, or maybe go to a movie. The experience of disappointment or withdrawal is very hard to tolerate. Today, in too many cases, our culture defines the uncomfortable experience of disappointment or withdrawal with a diagnostic label such as depression or anxiety—diseases that need to be cured. Large corporations make a great deal of money creating medicines to *cure* these uniquely modern ailments.

It can be helpful to take a step back and study the internal state created by a culture that provides and supports a rapidly increasing level of stimulation. In those moments when we are not engaged in stimulating activities—which are frequently moments of disappointment or withdrawal—what is actually occurring internally? That is, when we are not focused on participating in environments of stimulation or reducing the discomfort caused by lost stimulation, what happens when we find ourselves doing nothing? We must face the possibly extreme discomfort of merely experiencing our internal state with no explanation or solution to it.

This introspective activity is not well-supported in our society. Addiction loves company. I think of a patient of mine who in his 30s had been a heavy social drinker since his teens. After receiving his third DUI three years ago, he came to me with a resolve to stop drinking. He has been sober since, but he is astonished at the persistent efforts of his friends to get him to return to drinking. The media continually promises health, wealth, relief, and happiness to those who adopt stimulating/addictive activities. People who choose to abstain are often thought of as square, not cool, old-fashioned, boring, or timid.

Given this environment of stimulation, what occurs when we chose to engage in psychoanalysis or Buddhist meditation? In the mainstream culture of psychotherapy today, now that the practice of advertising therapeutic services has become accepted, promises of comfort abound—make an appointment and get relief from depression, fix your marriage, or improve your sexual functioning. It is hardly surprising that someone would enter psychotherapy with the expectation that this activity is going to make him or her feel better. The increasing popularity of so-called “evidenced-based approaches” pressures therapists to relieve a patient’s symptoms right away. Similarly, the popularization of Eastern religions in our culture has also come with promises of peace and happiness, relief from whatever state of dissatisfaction or disappointment you may be struggling with.

But what really happens in psychoanalysis? Once the initial stimulation of entering analysis and gaining the exclusive attention of the analyst recedes, we know that what we term the *transference neurosis* develops—that is, the patient’s fundamental intrapsychic and interpersonal repetitions emerge and he or she is likely to experience frustration because nothing is happening. The patient’s impulse to leave or to find some way to stimulate the analyst increases. During this period, the patient might be said to be experiencing withdrawal or disappointment as his or her fantasies of relief or fulfillment go unanswered, particularly if the analyst remains an essentially neutral, investigative object. If the analyst is successful in helping the patient put hopes, wishes, and fantasies into words and then to describe their underlying emotional experience in the present, the patient might be able to learn how to tolerate the momentary, ongoing experience of disappointment or “nothing happening.”

Likewise, in Buddhist-oriented awareness mediation, fascination with one’s thoughts begins to recede once the endless patterns of hope, fear, and expectation are recognized. Frustration, boredom, anxiety, and physical discomfort emerge in the moment, while meditating, as one realizes that nothing is, in fact, happening and nothing will. How disappointing!

In analysis and meditation, once outside stimulation has been minimized, one's own internal state of stimulation moves to the foreground of awareness. Accustomed to denying this reality through fantasy or action, we find this to be a most uncomfortable state. With little identifiable context, it might be experienced as disappointment, withdrawal, anxiety, or depression. I recall a conversation I had with my wizened meditation instructor shortly after beginning to meditate. I was telling him how terrific I thought meditation was. He commented ruefully, "Wait until you discover that it's not so terrific."

When considering the ramifications of disappointment in psychoanalysis, perhaps the most important variable to consider is countertransference. All analysts are acquainted with the subtleties and vicissitudes of countertransference, as a response to induction from the patient as well as to forces emanating from our own unresolved conflicts. The induction of disappointment from the patient is perhaps one of the most difficult manifestations of countertransference to tolerate. Most of us want to feel helpful to our patients, to witness progress, to alleviate suffering. A disappointed patient induces equally uncomfortable feelings of disappointment in the analyst. In addition, because today's culture of psychotherapy places so much emphasis on measurable, definable progress and symptom relief, an analyst's professional sense of self is challenged by patients who induce disappointment. Given these circumstances, it is inevitable that an analyst will feel the impulse to act in ways that will relieve disappointment in the patient, and by extension, in his- or herself. Even our most genuine attempts at understanding, our most brilliant, insightful, and accurate interpretations can be unconscious attempts to alleviate our own feelings of disappointment and anxiety by injecting *progress* into the treatment.

If it is true that psychoanalysis and Buddhism are, in fact, *paths of disappointment*, why walk those paths at all? One alleged reason for Freud's unpopularity was his so-called pessimism, his notion that in the best of worlds, psychoanalysis could only help people come to terms with the arduousness of daily living (Freud, 1905/2000). The fundamental tenet of Buddhism is impermanence (Trungpa, 1976), the obvious implication being that at best, we might prepare for our own impermanence or death. So if psychoanalysis and Buddhism might merely help people live an ordinary life and prepare for the inevitability of death, why bother?

In context of everyday life, the less able we are to tolerate disappointment—or withdrawal from constant stimulation, as I have focused on in this paper—the more dependent we are on external sources of stimulation and fantasies of accomplishments, rewards, or relief to distract us from immediate internal and perceptual experiences.

Because external sources of stimulation are forever transitory and impossible to control, anxiety is inevitable. Therefore, we waste considerable energy trying to solve the inevitable and ever-present experience of disappointment.

If instead, through psychoanalysis or Buddhist meditation, we become more acclimated to and familiar with our own immediate state of disappointment, several things may become possible. As dependence on hope, solutions, and external sources of stimulation or distraction recedes, we may be able to experience a sense of freedom and true independence. We can learn to live with, and fully experience, the negative emotions of fear, sadness, frustration, loss, yearning, and so on. In familiar psychological terminology, this might mean that we could learn to accept and appreciate ourselves for who we are; neurosis, defenses, and all. We might be able to tolerate anxiety and intense emotional states, become familiar with our own minds, and become less reactive to the ups and downs of others.

Disappointment would become just one part of the total experience of being alive. This might be akin to what we think of as true individuation or a healthy ego. We would begin to see that this state of being is actually universal, and that could foster genuine connectedness to and compassion for others.

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