Chapter 15

Religion in Therapy: Theravada Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

The absence of a central holy scripture in Buddhism and myriad manifestations coalesced into indigenous cultural communities across South and South-East Asia, presenting a formidable challenge to define Buddhism and its practices. This complexity may also be manifested in clients of Theravada background, making them elusive candidates in the therapy room. Complexity notwithstanding, Buddhism offers fertile learning ground for any optimistic multicultural counselor. For the purpose of this chapter, several selected fundamentals of Theravada Buddhism are presented with an emphasis on their possible cultural meanings and on therapeutic utility. This chapter is written from the perspective of Theravada school of Buddhism as it is taught, practiced, and seen in South-East Asia. The author’s knowledge and personal experience in Buddhism as a former Buddhist monk, experience of Buddhism as a lay practitioner now, and as a practicing counselor inevitably influence, inspire, and may even limit the parameters of this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Fundamental concepts of Theravada Buddhism such as mindfulness, loving-kindness, compassion, impermanence, non-self, dependent origination have already been introduced to the clinical and philosophical lexicon by practitioners and thinkers based in the west and these clinical and academic applications of Theravada fundamentals seem to complement or to advance the clinical and philosophical efforts toward the reduction of suffering and lasting happiness among professionals and clients they work with. The clinical application of Buddhist fundamentals have been endorsed and encouraged by notable authority figures of Buddhism such as Dalali Lama and people who are interested in meditation are increasingly received for retreat and ordination in monasteries in Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. It would be fair to state that this growing trend in the west is similar in spirit to the trend that was reported at the beginning of the historical Buddha’s career when the teachings were received without the religious labeling


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on them, making the practice and application of the teachings more direct and immediate. Many in the west encountered Buddhism through clinical exposure (Fulton, 2013) or while in a deliberate quest for alleviation of existential suffering and therefore the teachings and application were direct and immediate experiences for them, a self-evident epistemological quality that distinguished the teachings of the Buddha from his contemporary teachings. Many in fact recognize the teachings of the Buddha as a form of psychotherapy rather than a religion (Lee et al., 2017; Fulton, 2013; Segall, 2003; Michalon, 2001) and in that recognition they come closer to the central goal of the teacher as the healer (Rahula, 1978) and teachings as a means to end the sufferings (Bodhi, 2009). However, the clinical application of Buddhist concepts in societies where Buddhism is associated with orthodox religion with all the features of an organized religion may not be as straightforward as in non-Buddhist cultures.

As Ando (2008) recognized it, Buddhism in Asian societies is regarded as a religion and individual is born into a Buddhist cultural network without having to discover the teachings through an existential quest for happiness or freedom. From childhood, the individual is inducted in to religious culture in which Buddhist teachings are practiced blending them with indigenous beliefs, rituals and practices, a phenomenon that presents both opportunities and challenges for the integration of Buddhist fundamentals into counseling and psychotherapy in traditionally Buddhist societies. For example, the emphasis on values such as gratitude and generosity is notable and rituals such as making offerings to the monks are utilized to cultivate them in Asian societies. However, the application of fundamentals such as mindfulness in traditional Buddhist societies seems to be lagging behind the non-traditional Buddhist societies partly because the fundamentals with direct and immediate experiential benefits are covered with layers of cultural idiosyncrasies, rituals and hierarchies; many in traditional Buddhist societies tend believe that the spiritual benefits of Buddhist practice are too high-hanging fruits for them to reach and that they have not yet reached the stage to tune into those states. Many in traditional Buddhist societies are also influenced by the theistic thinking patterns and tend to live life hoping for a better afterlife. These self-defeating cognitive barriers may well be on your way when you begin to work with a Theravada Buddhist client and this juncture can be considered as a journey toward the rediscovery of the healing properties of the teachings of the Buddha that were diluted in the process of cultural evolution of Buddhism as a religion.

In the presentation of selected fundamentals of Buddhism in this chapter, while acknowledging the contributions of Buddhist scholars in the east and the west to the philosophical interpretations of Buddhism, attempt is made to inform the helping professionals of possible meanings these fundamentals may hold for the lay Theravada Buddhists. In doing so, the therapeutic utility of the fundamentals is highlighted much more than the philosophical depth of those concepts. Some case examples of working with Theravada Buddhist clients in counseling are presented and possible future directions and challenges in harmonizing psychotherapy and Buddhism in Theravada Buddhist societies are reflected upon at the end.

Selected Fundamentals of Theravada Buddhism

The Triple Gems: Source of Mental and Social Support

Though often overlooked in the western scientific community perhaps due to the absence of full-scale Sangha in respective societies, the triple gems may hold significant value for a Buddhist of Theravada background. These three gems and taking refuge in them by the way should not be confused with worshipping real precious stones like ruby or sapphire; triple gems symbolically refer to the Buddha, the
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