

Psychological aspect of Buddhist education

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Introduction-

As a psychiatrist, I frequently realize these days that there are many ways in Buddhist path to keep mind healthy, to keep oneself balanced at adversities and to help heal mental agonies or ailments. If they are well analyzed and used in day to day practice, we will be able to enjoy and regain health in case we fall sick and make our life meaningful through our own and familiar strategies. It is a great achievement for modern medicine to be accepted by people with local flavor, culture and oneness. To be sought help only during compelled situations by needy people is not the real fame and regard for a field including medicine. It needs to be available, acceptable and affordable¹ to be popular; but here, I am not going to discuss on this line. My intension is to express my imagination, wish and concern about how we can make our service more familiar, culture friendly and acceptable among our service users. I find the example from Thailand relevant here. Buddhist monks are actively involved in the treatment of a great problem there, i.e. Opiate and other psychoactive substance use disorders; the approach has proved its effectiveness.² My hearty wish is that may such types of approach of mental health service win the heart of people of our society which is yet largely to understand and accept mental ailments as diseases/ disorders, and to seek help from health service providers.³ When people heartily accept and utilize, only then the services established with a great resources will achieve the objectives of both the service providers and seekers. This is the need of the current psychiatry in Nepal.

When I am sitting to write this article in such a time, I remember a saying that I heard repeatedly from Buddhist scholars and monks. They used to say; 'Buddhist teaching, in fact, has evolved as if to keep mind healthy.⁴⁻⁶ Lord Buddha is, in fact, an exemplary therapist who instructed the clients with analysis of psychological and mental aspect'.^{7,8} Here, I am trying to write about the feelings coming in my mind with the same realization. I am writing it also with the hope that the scholar readers will contribute to give this thought a better meaning, worth and to make it more successful in showing common people the right direction.

Siddhartha's Life and Supremacy of Mind-

When *Siddhartha Gautama* was born, (I heard that) there was no less violence, terrorism, discrimination, ailments, famine, poverty and suffering among people. However, *Siddhartha* was a prince of his era! That too, brought up with special importance and intention with

tender care, extreme comfort and non-compromising facilities. We read the description of his personality as a handsome, robust and attractive one with good manner. Beautiful better half *Yashodhara*, cute baby son *Rahul*, loving and respecting father King *Suddhodhana*, lovely Royal family, sincere servants and trustworthy country people⁸.... enough for a prince. It was a complete life for that time from material view point. What was not there that he had to abandon the palace? Why did he leave his life which was full of fun and happiness; content from all apparent perspectives?

Despite all those things, it was the mind which could not rest and feel peace, and drew and lead *Siddhartha* from ordinary human life to Buddha path. Human life and society are apparently driven by wealth, beautiful women, posts, materials but they are just means. In fact, it is the mind which drives and directs human life and society. *Siddhartha's* life shows that our life and world are driven by the state and direction of our mind. *Lord Buddha* also has stated this in his holy saying that; 'Mind always goes first and hence, mind is the main'. Today also, those people who direct their mind towards a balanced, far-sighted and right destination will lead their life to progress, achievement and success as *Siddhartha* headed towards *Buddha path*. Even if somebody who is deviated appears great and high for some time, s/he would suffer from their inner conflict and mental distress. We usually forget this supremacy of mind and become aimless. May this realization be just not for the sake of saying, but make our life philosophy. Then, a real Buddhist human being will evolve, as a patient of migraine headache *Satyanayan Goenka* became *Vipassana Guru* for mankind.

Travel through Buddha path-

After leaving home, *Siddhartha* put every effort in search of truth and enlightenment, as severe meditation and hard rituals for six long years. But he could not achieve the expected knowledge when he dried his body in hard mediation and sufferings. *Siddhartha Gautama* got the real enlightenment through the mediation carried out by healthy body in healthy mind state. This should be also our life philosophy. When he left the meditation and adopted hygiene, cleaning, holy food and then meditation; he was criticized and looked down. But, he did not give up. *Siddhartha* proved here that there was no body in the past who was never criticized, there are nobody who is not criticized and there will be none not criticized in this world. But we need to keep on following the right path. This has remained as a holy *Buddha* saying.⁹ I find *Lord Buddha's* teaching relevant

here; *Buddha* says that there is no *Nirvana* with undisciplined consumption, fun and lust; nor with strong suffering and rituals without thought as *Siddhartha* practiced in his initial years of exploration. Real freedom could be achieved through the balance of body, mind and practice. His middle path realization that body and mind are two sides of a coin has been a main principle of current psychiatry. In fact; balanced diet, exercise and thought have been the guiding principles and basis of the health or medicine as a whole.

Mental or Psychological- Unforgettable aspect!

While defining health, the World Health Organization (WHO) said in 1948 AD, 'It is a complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely an absence of disease and infirmity'¹. Whereas *Lord Buddha* taught centuries back to keep ones *karma* balanced and pure in: body, speech and mind. There is an indication of physical, mental and social dimension in this teaching. *Lord Buddha* highlighted the importance of conscious intension of mind while teaching about *karma*. His holy sayings goes like, 'World is ephemeral, make note of every moment of this fleeting nature. Do good with conscious mind, preserve *Dhamma* and refrain from bad deed'. While clarifying about the *karma* which took place unknowingly through body, *Lord Buddha* exemplified through the event of a blind monk *Chakhupal* who happened to kill earthworms in the ground while walking that one is not liable to the unknowingly done mistakes or deeds. Because of such concepts, *Buddha* teaching is known as *Karma principle*, that too *Mind Karma principle*. Psychological dimension is almost equivalent in the WHO's definition of health, though physical dimension practically receives major importance in the name of health. In such a present time, for the positive change, we need to realize that nothing works when mind does not. If other things do not work, balanced mind may settle and cope with the situation. As *Lord Buddha* said mind to be the main, let's remember that health is incomplete without mental. And; let's try to live, utilize and enjoy a life with complete health, with mental.

Buddha path for Mental health-

Lord Buddha realized the '*four Noble Truth*' and spread it for the welfare of the whole mankind.⁸ According to this truth, there is a sorrow, suffering, agony or trouble arising out of birth, ageing, ailments and death. It has its root or reason and that is want or lust. Its solution is possible and there is a way out for this. This concept is similar or even more comprehensive than the 'problem solving' approach utilized and highlighted in modern psychology.⁹ *Lord Buddha* pointed out '*five Noble Precepts*' and '*Eight-fold Noble Paths*' for healthy living, i.e. prevention of ailments or in a way, prevention of suffering. The basis of which is the '*mana*' or mind.

The Eight-fold Noble path strategies are important for the promotion of mental health. The Eight-fold Noble path includes: right vision (appropriate attitude), right determination, right speech, right action or deed, right living, right exercise, right memory, and right concentration. To understand the 'four Noble Truth' precisely and correctly is the right vision. The wish to remain free from lust and wants is the right determination. Not to lie, speak harse, vulgar or defame others is right speech. Right action means refraining from theft, cookery, dacoit and spoiling a woman. Right living is living with the occupation which does not harm others or one will have to leave the world with defame and blasphemy. Right exercise encompasses the attempt to walk in the path of hard work through self discipline. Right memory or conscience is the process of keeping one's mind pure, selfish less ness, and wise. Right concentration means to keep mind intensively peaceful, pure and stable. *Lord Buddha* indicated that mind is the source or origin of all things, and that its purity or cleanliness is required for its health, freedom or *nirvana*. '*Five Noble Precepts*' has been shown as the way of its purification. The 'five Noble Precepts' or '*Panchasheela*' incorporates a component of refraining from the use of psychoactive substance which is an important preventive strategy for mental ailments. The strategies; including refraining from: mis-behavior, spoiling others, lying, killing animals all help reduce stress. These principles can be directives for the management of anti-social tendencies and personality which has been an issue of headache for modern mental health practice. This also clarifies that mind and psychological dimension is of paramount importance in Buddhist teaching/ education.

Mind in Health and Buddha path-

Mind and brain is the controlling centre of human body. It keeps all biological processes and activities balanced. Hence, cardiovascular (heart), respiratory (lungs), digestive (stomach and respective), and all other biological functions continue in balanced and intensive manner. Similarly, a person's higher mental functions, e.g.: behavior, speech, mood/ affect and emotion, thought, perception, consciousness, attention/ concentration, orientation, memory, intelligence, judgment and insight are under the direct involvement of brain and mind. These are the functions which make a man human. The mind with the functioning brain with all these processes can achieve spiritual peace through dedication, exercise and precise practice. Such a flexible nature or capacity of human mind or brain has been termed 'neuro-plasticity' by modern Neuroscience through which *Siddhartha Gautama* became *Lord Buddha*. *Buddhaship* has been defined as such a mental state where a person remains conscious, alert, conscientious and wise.⁸ One heads towards freedom and develops an ability to guide the world to *nirvana*.

Lord Buddha adopted the meditation strategy as an important way of positively restructuring and reconstructing the mind and brain. One may attain a state of super-consciousness by extending the dimension or horizon of mind state inclusive of: alertness, love, affection, compassion, peace, conscience, spirit and wisdom. In such a mental state, a person will be creative, far sighted and wise. In fact, *Lord Buddha* is the first person who showed the freedom path without supreme God, emphasizing on the possibility of attaining such a state without resorting to or relying on higher power, God or other person but through one's own hard work, process and perseverance. He established the supremacy of the human mind and indicated its possibility with all people in this world. *Lord Buddha* emphasized that since oneself is the master, Lord or hero of self, one should take responsibility of one's deed, decision, judgment and future. Here is a message that indicates the need of the lifelong and continued effort to develop and improve one's character.

Buddha approach for Mental health-

Lord Buddha performed his teachings keeping this possibility inherent within every individual. While approaching a person to be awakened for the *Buddha path*, Buddha did not straight teach him or her. Rather *Lord Buddha* first assessed ones mental state and spirit whether or not in position to receive the *Dharma deshana*, i.e. *Buddha education*. This approach could be a directive for modern clinicians/ doctors for averting the professional confusion. There are so many sick people; there lies the answer to the question of serving to whom among them.

In a way, *Lord Buddha* is the first and unique psychiatrist and psychologist because his intension was to attain the state of super-consciousness or *nirvana* by removing the impurities of one's psyche or mind.⁷ It means, the main objective of *Buddhist teaching and education* seems to make people able to live healthy life. According to *Buddhist psychology*, messages continuously come to mind through five senses every moment and they bring various physical and mental feelings and effects. It arouses the want, lust or thirst for the world and various worldly materials. Such lusts and wants invite unrest, sorrow or sufferings. Day to day functioning of an individual gets disturbed because of such an unrest and unbalanced mind, thereby making a person ill or sick. *Lord Buddha* indicated the meditation as an important way of encountering and removing the main factor of mental misbalance and illness.

Meditation for Mental peace-

There is a vital place for meditation in *Buddhist tradition* because one can regulate emotion, promote physical health, relaxation, improve concentration and realize the truth through the meditation.¹⁰ Literal meaning of

'meditation' is to explore with effort into one's own mind closing the eyes. However, its broader definition is to remain conscious, alert, unattached and neutral (i.e. mindful) in every moment and step of life. Buddhist traditions offer widely applicable, extensive, precise, detailed and systematic theories about concentrative and diffuse forms of meditation, which have essentially remained unchanged since its inception 2500 years ago. Hence, two of the most common meditation styles derived from Buddhist tradition are: *Concentrative* and *Monitoring meditation*. In *Concentrative* meditation, one exercises cognitively to maintain and continually refocus the attention on a particular object, e.g. a body sensation, single point in space, color, object, sound, or affective state, e.g. compassion. In open-monitoring meditation, one tries to inculcate a present-centered and unattached/ neutral/ equanimous mode of observation toward all sensational phenomena, including thoughts. They are often combined in themselves and also with other modes like *Transcendental meditation* for particular objective. *Buddha psychology* emphasizes on the need of remaining mindful for impermanence or change (of continuous beginning, passing and ending of phenomena from moment to moment), i.e. *Insight meditation*. It promotes the development of one's psychology, personality and character. This is such a method which has been found equally or more effective in the prevention, treatment of mental illness and promotion of mental health.

Such an exercise to purify and clean the mind or spirit adopts the middle path. Neither it is intensely harsh, utterly disciplined and unbearably painful nor is it vagabond or straying approach. For this, rather a continuous attempt is required to keep oneself balanced with conscious and alert consideration of everything coming into one's life and mind. The concept of 'life style with such mindfulness' is getting more and more of popularity these days worldwide. Mindfulness-based therapeutic techniques have also been extensively incorporated into psychiatric and other medical settings as evidence based therapeutic programs, e.g. mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), dialectical behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, relapse-prevention therapy (MET), and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. And, it has been reported as effective in treating depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol use disorders, and various personality disorders. These programs have gained popularity for hypertension, stress, and cardiovascular illness, and in prevention or reversing neuro-degenerative and cognitive decline.

Buddha approach for mental problem-

The psychological method of *Lord Buddha* to help those reactively disturbed, illusioned and impulsive people in response to circumstances was unique and

incomparable. The approach and the method that Lord Buddha adopted according to an individual's mental state are exemplary to the modern mental health professionals as well. The psychological method and discourse of *Lord Buddha with Angulimala* (shattered and utterly distressed by false and serious allegation) and that with *Krishagautami* (shocked due to untimely and unexpected death of her child) are outstanding examples. It's the truth and nature of this world and life that everything is ephemeral, changing and inconstant, making human life also liable to ageing, ailments, disability and death. *Buddhist education* always emphasizes on this fact. And; it also highlights on the duty of taking care of and serving parents, needy elderly and sick people. In this regard, Lord Buddha says, 'Serving elderly, sick people and parents is equivalent to serving Lord Buddha himself'.⁹ The presence of healer named *Jeevak* in Buddhist literature indicates about the need of help seeking in need while falling a sick, ill or diseased. Emperor King *Ashok the Great* is the esteemed follower of Buddhist path who practically demonstrated it by establishing many hospitals and centers in various places for mentally ill, sick animals and other sick people. Though *Lord Buddha* himself was an extraordinary learned and far-sighted, especially unique psychologist, he sought help of the health professional of that time, i.e. *Vaidhya*. And, this fact indicates the respect of *Lord Buddha* for respective role and place of medicine. At the same time, *Buddhist education* encourages for the improvement and purification of one's character and mind by realizing the responsibility of differentiating right from wrong through healthy mind.

Buddhist path emphasizes on the importance of one's action, *karma* of self. It views the ailments both physical and mental as suffering or sorrow and indicates the need for prevention by self-conscious measures in prior. At the same time, it talks about the importance of support of relatives, friends and others in need. *Lord Buddha* has given a special meaning and worth for the act of helping and serving other people. It is because any person may have to face the fate of ailment, suffering, disability, elderly and debility in this fleeting, uncertain and effervescent world.

Need of Comprehensive analysis of Buddhist philosophy-

This emphasis on uncertainty and changing nature, and the message of oneself as a master of self of *Buddhist tradition* are blamed at times to be contributing to seemingly high suicide rates in Buddhist societies and countries. There is a preponderance of Buddhism followers in Sri Lanka where there is a notably higher suicide rate. Some US states and societies with higher number of Buddhists have also shown high suicide rates. There has been a need of investigation into bio-psycho-social etiological factors behind this. As clarified in

totality by modern psychiatry and suicidology, there might be other underlying factors responsible for this, rather than Buddhist philosophy of ephemeral and changing nature and of self-reliance and mastery making oneself responsible for one's fate. Suicide is usually the result of multitude of the factors rather than a single one.^{2,11} However, the followers and teachers of Buddhist philosophy should not forget some of the facts. All needs to realize that body and brain/ mind get sick/ ill. One may not remain balanced in many of such illnesses/ disorders as in healthy state. Mental illness has been proved to be the most important reason of suicide.² There is a need of early detection and treatment of such symptoms and disorders of mind. As illustrated by *Lord Buddha*, this will help prevent and reduce suffering, in the form of ailment, mental illness and its complications. All teachers, monks, nuns, Guru, Lama, priests, followers need to keep this thing in mind.

Need of Integrated holistic approach-

The three dimensions of health (physical, mental and social)¹ and three perspectives (bio-psycho-social) model of cause and effect of mental disorders² have been a wider concept of modern medicine. *Lord Buddha*, in his era appears to address the psychological and social aspects comparatively more than physical and biological ones. Considering the background, state of medicine at that time and *Siddhartha Gautama* not being basically from medical background, *Lord Buddha* appears to be a mental health professional/ psychiatrist with more inclination towards psychology and social psychiatry than biological, from current perspective. Hence, some of the concepts and things which are explainable in the background of current medicine remained silent or mum in the write-up and Buddhist literature of that time. For instance, the management of psychosis characterized by delusion and hallucination only with psycho-social approach will be incomplete and ineffective. It essentially needs antipsychotics which were developed much later, and were not available then. Whatever descriptions were made about mind and its related aspects in Buddha era with no knowledge about neurochemicals, transmitters, and their receptors at that time; they remained undisputable, however. Rather many investigators and psychological propounders had to struggle a lot more to explain the process, nature and facts about mind. Hence, a follower of Buddhist path at this era should proceed, not blindly, but judging/ testing Buddhist education/ lesson and modern Medicine through the knowledge of yesterday, today's search and one's conscience. One needs to realize the danger of understanding Buddhist philosophy and modern Medicine in incomplete and partial manner. Now, time has come to realize the integrated approach combining both Buddhist teaching and modern psychiatry for healthy mind and brain. Buddhist conceptions and practices dealing with emotional and psychological

issues conceptually include even those that have been ignored by many modern psychologists and mental health professionals. Methodologically, they offer practices that can help individuals reactively distressed and also all who seek to improve the quality of their lives. With revisions, Buddhist practices may even offer a therapy for disturbed people.¹²

Really, as learned and wise scholars say; Buddhist teaching came forth to keep the mind healthy. And, the place of mind and psychological aspect is supreme in Buddhist education.

May peace prevail!

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