

Buddhist Psychotherapeutic Theory and Practice from the Perspective of the Yogācāra School of Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

The theories proposed by the Yogācāra School of Buddhism provide a foundation for explaining human behavior in reality building and testing, as well as the mistakes human beings make in this process. The theories also offer alternatives for human beings to transcend from an ordinary consciousness to an enlightened mind. The school is thus believed to provide a theoretical and practical perspective for psychotherapy. This article describes the Yogācāra theories of consciousness and idealistic reflection and their relation to the origin and reduction of sufferings. The implications of these theories for a psychotherapeutic theory and practice are also discussed.

Introduction

Śākyamuni Buddha, after becoming enlightened, spent forty-nine years of his life spreading the teachings of which he became enlightened about, the so called “ultimate truth,” or the truth experienced after extinguishing the sense of relativity. The purpose of his teachings was to alleviate human suffering (*dukkha*) caused by illusory thoughts and desires. Hence, his main concerns were “pragmatic and therapeutic” and his primary focus was “psychological and ethical” (Rubin, 1996, p. 16). De Silva (1979) elaborated on the therapeutic nature of Buddha’s teachings by stating that the “psychology of Buddhism is primarily designed to answer the questions ‘What are the causes of suffering?’ and ‘What is the way out of it?’” (p. 8).

Among the various schools of Buddhism, the Yogācāra is considered to be the most psychological in nature, and its mind-only doctrine is labeled Buddhist psychology. According to the proponents of the school, no reality exists outside of consciousness. Therefore human suffering and misery is merely a product of the mind. How the Yogācāra school interprets the psychological processes that form the basis for human suffering and what the therapeutic theory and practice this school posits to liberate human beings from suffering are the focus of this paper.

The Origin of Suffering from the Perspective of the Yogācāra School

The Yogācāra school articulates a sophisticated system of consciousness to explain how human beings falsely build a reality from their perceptions of themselves and the surrounding environment. According to the Yogācāra, there are eight kinds of consciousness that we possess and each of them has its unique function in facilitating us in establishing what we believe to be reality. The eight kinds of consciousness and their functions are briefly described as follows:

- (1) Foundation Consciousness, or the eighth consciousness or *alayavijñāna*: Also known as the storehouse consciousness, the 8th consciousness is believed to be the repository of all of our past experiences, or “imprints, the habits, and latent propensities” as elaborated by Dalai Lama (Varela, 1998, p. 271), that one has accumulated in this and former lives. Although it is generally said to be morally neutral, neither virtuous nor non-virtuous, some Buddhist scholars claim that our Buddha nature is also stored in this consciousness. The foundation consciousness is ever-present, and it is the core of the self identity of an individual. According to the Yogācāra theory, the 8th consciousness accounts for the transition from one life to another. What is stored in this consciousness can become conscious through profound meditation or enlightenment. The foundation consciousness is thus different from the psychoanalytic unconscious.
- (2) The Seventh Consciousness or *Manah*: This is a consciousness of thinking and measuring or calculating. The consciousness is constantly active, and functions like the stream of a waterfall. The operation of the 7th consciousness is profoundly hidden underneath our consciousness, or in “latent states” as described by Tibetan Buddhism (Varela, 1998, p. 265). It is also the basis of all sorts of attachments.
- (3) The Sixth Consciousness or Mental Consciousness: This consciousness and the five forms of consciousness resulting from the five sense organs to be described below are normally called consciousness by psychoanalysts or “manifest states of consciousness” by Tibetan Buddhists (Varela, 1998, p. 265). Through these six forms of consciousness we are aware of ourselves and the existing world. The 6th consciousness is built upon and also the basis of the awareness resulting from the five sense organs, including eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body. The function of this consciousness is to distinguish and investigate our internal and external worlds. The consciousness, however, is not always present. When we are in sleep or in a unconscious state, the 6th consciousness is not active.
- (4-8) The Five Forms of Consciousness from the Five Senses: These are produced through the contacts between the five sense organs and the five external objects. The visual consciousness produced by eyes seeing objects, the auditory consciousness produced by ears hearing sound, the olfactory consciousness produced by nose smelling odor, the gustatory consciousness produced by tongue experiencing taste, and the tactile consciousness produced by body having touch. Like the 6th consciousness, these five forms of consciousness are operating under full awareness but they are not always active.

Comparing the theory of the eight forms of consciousness proposed by the Yogācāra school with the theory of psychoanalysis, we can find some similarities between the functions of the Yogācāra consciousness and the id, ego, and superego of the personality structures hypothesized by Sigmund Freud. The id is the ultimate source of all psychic energy. As a very primitive structure, it operates on satisfying drives and desires, the pleasure principle as termed by Freud. It functions underneath the consciousness and is present from the birth. The 7th consciousness depicted by the Yogācāra seems to share many similarities with the id such as being self-oriented and operating unconsciously. The ego is a socialized id and operates on the reality

principle. Through the ego, the individual learns to differentiate between fantasy and reality and to gain some control over the external environment. According to Freud, the functions of the ego can be fully aware, available to awareness upon recall, or not available to awareness such as repressed anxieties. The nature and operations of the ego may be comparable with the 6th consciousness in the Yogācāra theory as both are operating in a relatively socialized way and mostly under awareness. The third psychic structure, the superego, serves primarily as a “conscience” and provides a set of goals for the individual to strive for achievement. This seems to resemble the function of the Buddha nature stored in the foundation consciousness described by the Yogācāra Buddhists.

The reality that ordinary individuals generate through the functions of the eight forms of consciousness is, alas, not only faulty but also based on “a particular type of misperception which inverts the actual order of things” (Engler, 1998, p. 115). We misperceive what is impermanent as permanent, what is incapable of affording lasting satisfaction as satisfying, and what is without enduring substance or selfhood as being substantial or an independently existing self. In other words, because of faulty reality building and testing, we ordinarily perceive ourselves and the external world to be just the opposite of the way they really are. This inverted view (i.e., *vipallasa*) of the self and objects is, according to the Buddha, the origin of the suffering experienced by sentient beings.

The Process of Transcending from Ignorance to Enlightenment

Building upon the theory of the origin of human suffering, the Yogācāra Buddhists further develop theories to proclaim hope for ending the suffering. One of the theories that may shed light on the development of mechanism to cease the suffering is the theory of three subjects of idealistic reflection. This theory of idealistic reflection and the effect on human behaviors are described as follows:

- (1) All the existing objects and the self are perceived as realities. This mistake is committed through the interactions between the eight forms of consciousness and the external world from beginningless time. As a result, human beings develop illusory thoughts and the inverted view of the self and objects and revolve around life and death like a wheel (i.e., *samsāra*).
- (2) All the existing objects and the self are produced by causes and conditions. This view refutes the idea of a substantial existence of anything. As everything is caused by many conditions which lead to a right circumstance for its occurrence or extinction, nothing exists permanently nor has it an independent selfhood. An individual cultivated by this view will gradually develop less attachments to desires, and more to the right view of existence.
- (3) The only reality (i.e., *bhūtatatahā*) is a state above all differentiation and beyond thought. It is an undivided absolute, is static and not phenomenal. It implies the Buddha nature, or the immateriality and unity of all things. This

ultimate truth is what Buddha realized after becoming enlightened and claimed that everyone of us has the potential of realizing it.

The Yogācāra Buddhists believe that if human beings work diligently on cultivating their minds, they are capable of transcending from the ignorance induced by the illusory mind to achieve *prajñā*, or Buddha's wisdom. How the Yogācāra theory of the consciousness and the transformation of the mind sheds light on psychotherapy will be discussed below.

The Implications of the Yogācāra for a Psychotherapeutic Theory and Practice

Based on the above discussion of the Yogācāra theory, a psychotherapeutic theory with the following assumptions may be hypothesized.

- (1) Human suffering in various forms arises from illusory perceptions of the self and external environment.
- (2) Understanding the concept of causes and conditions reduces illusory thoughts.
- (3) Achievement of a mental state above all differentiation and beyond thought is the ultimate goal of psychotherapy.

Based on these theoretical assumptions, a number of daily practices may be suggested to clients in need of psychotherapy:

- (1) Develop the right view: Being the first of the Eightfold Path taught by Buddha, the right view refers to all the teachings by Buddha regarding the ultimate truth, including the Four Noble Truths (i.e., suffering exists; suffering arises from attachments to desires; suffering ceases when attachments to desires cease; and freedom from suffering is possible by practicing the Eightfold Path), the universal law of cause and effect, and the cause of ignorance by illusory consciousness. The client should cultivate his/her mind through meditation or profound contemplation to develop right view.
- (2) Establish a clear sense of self: In Yogācāra theory and the contemporary psychoanalytic theories, such as ego psychology theory and object relations theory, self is seen as a mental representation or construct, not an entity (Engler, 1998). It is constructed in our mind in an ongoing process, moment by moment. The development of a sense of self is a central focus in much of therapy. Through self-reflection and constant mindfulness, a clear sense of self can be established which will result in the reduction of many illusory thoughts and hence overcome suffering.
- (4) Practice meditation: Through the training of bare attention, concentration and mindfulness required by the practice of meditation, one will learn to focus the mind and investigate from a state of heightened clarity and inner quietude (Rubin, 1996). Meditation will engender inner peace and happiness, self-awareness, and a clear mind focusing on the here-and-now.

- (5) Maintain mindfulness: In the *Saṭṭipatthāna Sūtra* (Soma, 1962), Buddha asserted that mindfulness—awareness without judgment, attachment, or aversion to what is happening in the present moment—was the most important factor in diminishing unwholesome states of mind and cultivating wholesome ones. The precondition of freedom, according to Buddha, is the development of mindfulness in four areas: (1) bodily phenomena; (2) “feelings,” which refer to the reactions of “pleasantness,” “unpleasantness,” and “neutrality” that accompany every moment of consciousness; (3) consciousness or mental phenomena; and (4) “Dharma,” or the universal laws underlying life proclaimed by Buddha, e.g., the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold path. Maintaining a state of mindfulness is thus therapeutic.

Conclusion

The Yogācāra school of Buddhism provides a theoretical foundation for psychotherapeutic theory and practice from the perspective of the faulty reality testing, engendered by the illusory consciousness, and the potentiality of transcending from the consciousness to Buddha’s wisdom. This perspective, however, represents only a convenient way of explaining human behaviors. As pointed out by the Dalai Lama from the Prāsangika Mādhyamaka view, both the consciousness and the mental continuum exist only conventionally, not substantially (Varela, 1998). There is therefore no need to assert that “something must be findable under analysis, something that *is* the self” (Varela, 1998, p. 274). This temporary, not absolute, nature of the Yogācāra theory should be recognized, and in the meantime its value for psychotherapy should not be underestimated.

On the other hand, to increase the therapeutic power it is needed to integrate the Western psychological, especially psychoanalytic, and Buddhist paths. The emphasis of psychoanalysis on past experiences and the emotions related to the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and intimacy can be complementary to Buddhism’s emphasis on the here-and-now and selflessness. The emphasis of Buddhism on the tranquilizing qualities such as concentration and equanimity can also be complementary to psychoanalytic emphasis on active qualities such as investigation of mind and conduct (Rubin, 1996). In short, the integration of the theory and practice of Buddhist psychology and the Western psychology should strengthen the effect of psychotherapy.

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Once there was a man who felt that he had been insulted by someone. He wanted to get even with the person who had offended him, but he could not think how. He held his hatred in his heart and walked around feeling bitter and angry. One day a sorcerer asked him why he was so bitter. The man explained that he had been insulted and that he could not think of a good way to get even. The sorcerer said, "I know of a way to get even."

The man said, "Please tell me what it is."

The sorcerer said, "I know a curse that will kill the man you hate. However, I doubt that you will want to use it because one of the conditions of the curse is that if you use it, you will have to die too."

The man said, "I don't care! Tell me what it is!"

The sorcerer told him the curse and a few days later he learned that the man had died.

– *Buddhism: Pure and Simple*, Hsing Yun, pp.81-82