

BUDDHISM AND PSYCHOTHERAPY: A PERSONAL VIEWPOINT
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Surrounded by a forest of towering giants
Bid farewell to a tragic spirit
Allow your life to shine
With a spirit of joy and good cheer
Live out your youth
With all your might!

— SGI President Ikeda

Until the summer of 1997, I wasn't particularly open-minded on the subject of psychotherapy. I would meet people who were seeing a therapist and think to myself: "What a waste of time. All they're doing is dwelling in the past rather than changing their karma and making causes for the future." I believed that seeking the services of a therapist was a sign of weakness, an inability to use the practice to deal with problems. After all, I mistakenly reasoned, weren't we supposed to employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra to solve all our problems? And, wasn't the only way to change your karma on a fundamental level, the ninth consciousness, to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo? If I were to see a therapist, I thought I would be in essence admitting to myself that the practice didn't have the power to change my life or that my faith was just too weak.

My many years of chanting had enabled me to gain a large degree of control over my negative thoughts and I was much happier with myself. I had learned that if I chanted a lot, I could make my mind quiet down enough for me to function in daily life. I was also able to make and carry out strong determinations, had a warm loving family, and built a very successful career in marketing. Still, though I had overcome much of my unhappiness and insecurity through chanting, I was never entirely without the deep sadness and anger in my life that had tugged at me since my childhood.

What I began to realize was that through my practice, I had finally opened up enough to begin to explore some very painful aspects of my life. In "The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra," what Nichiren Daishonin actually said was "Employ the strategy of the Lotus Sutra before any other" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Dai-shonin*, vol. 1, p. 246). He didn't say we shouldn't seek out the appropriate medicine and guidance to heal ourselves but that we should base these activities on the wisdom and fortune that comes from our Buddha nature. At that point, all I needed was a powerful catalyst, an event that would compel me to change. Soon, two traumatic events occurred that pushed me right over the edge.

The first was the suicide of my good friend, Gordon. He had been my business mentor and a source of inspiration for most of the seventies and had finally retired a few years ago. His family and friends thought they knew him very well. He was always cheerful and full of great advice. It frightened me that he could be harboring such overwhelming anguish that he saw no way to continue living. Obviously, there were major issues in his life, just as in mine, that he had not processed. I wondered if I could afford to do the same?

A few years later, my wife, Trude, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. For the first six months, we both focused on finding the benefit of her illness. We gained a deeper appreciation for our practice, friends and each other as well as a stronger sense of mission. We looked at the gain but had yet to face the loss in our lives. One evening, Trude dis-

covered me lying down almost comatose, unable to move. I had fallen into an extremely depressed state, the kind of loneliness and helplessness I had experienced almost every day as a child and teenager.

There have been numerous SGI leaders over the years who have greatly encouraged and inspired me in my practice. However, it was through the additional help of a therapist that I was finally able to begin the painful but rewarding process of healing myself from the effects of my childhood, so that I could truly devote myself to my mission in the present. So, in the same way Trude went to a neurologist about her illness, I went to a psychotherapist about mine.

It was very important to me that I find a therapist whom I felt comfortable with and who had a supportive attitude toward my Buddhist practice, someone whom I felt a strong connection with — someone I could trust and who cared about me. I found one who had also studied Buddhist philosophy and meditation for many years and so was readily able to relate to my practice. Starting with my tremendous fear of losing Trude, I began exploring other aspects of my life that I had previously been too afraid to face.

This was not an easy process. I had to push myself through many tears and painful memories. I discovered that the messages I had assimilated as a child from an angry and abusive father and a disinterested mother greatly influenced my opinion of myself. I also realized that Buddhism and psychotherapy could be compatible. Perhaps Nichiren Daishonin could be considered a therapist! Understanding that human beings are often deluded to the truth, he wrote, “One should become the master of his mind rather than let his mind master him” (MW-1, 146). The same lessons I was learning from Nichiren Daishonin’s letters from a spiritual perspective were consistent with the realizations I was having on a more personal level in psychotherapy. Some of these were: the difference between feeling I should do something, which means I don’t have control, and choosing to do something; allowing myself to enjoy what there is to enjoy and to suffer what there is to suffer without judging myself; the importance of realizing that none of my attachments to people or things in this life will last forever; and not having to be busy or worried about something or like someone else to be respectable.

Trude and I just celebrated our 29th chanting and wedding anniversaries. For many years, we have chanted side by side in front of the Gohonzon. We like to think this has contributed to the strong love and unity in our family. About four months ago, we decided to chant 1 million daimoku to make significant progress in every aspect of our lives including extracting the most benefit possible from therapy. For the first time, we used the same chart to track our chanting. It was actually quite encouraging to be able to fill two boxes at a time instead of just one!

The ever-present heaviness that had plagued me has now diminished significantly. There is no way to describe how wonderful this makes me feel. I am also learning to allow myself to feel joy without guilt and to experience pain without panic. The essence of this is being able to live in the moment — something we are taught as Buddhists but that can be very elusive.

I don’t feel that psychotherapy has in any way diminished my faith in Buddhism. Rather, it has enhanced my practice. I am able to sit quietly and concentrate on my prayers where before I had a difficult time focusing for more than a few minutes at a time. Accepting that the emotions I’m feeling do not always reflect the truth, and that they won’t last forever, has helped me develop a more stable spiritual foundation. I am also learning new habits, new ways of thinking. My chanting has accelerated and strengthened this

process. I am slowly overcoming my addiction to drama and constant turmoil, an obsession with being busy, and a belief that I have to be funny for people to like me.

With my practice well centered as the prime point of my development, therapy has played an important supportive role, much as my wife battles her illness with the help of medical professionals.

I now have a much more profound appreciation and respect for anyone who takes constructive steps toward increased self-awareness and self-improvement. I also believe these actions can be consistent with our Buddhist practice regardless of whether they are within or without our organizational and religious boundaries. The key isn't whether something has the correct label but whether it rings true. As Buddhists, each of us must judge that for ourselves.

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