The comparison of existential psychology and Buddhist spirituality

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In this paper a comparison between Existentialism and Buddhism is investigated. The relationship is determined by comparing literature written in both fields of study. The focus of the paper concentrates on the importance of ontology, suffering, and death in both groups and how closely they relate to one another. The findings indicate that the spirituality of Buddhism and the psychology of Existentialism in combination, can culminate the experience of finding meaning in one's life and the discovery of self through the therapeutic experience. The paper will also provide a historical overview of Buddha himself and a review of his basic teachings which is necessary due to the limited information available to the therapeutic audience.
THE COMPARISON OF EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY
AND BUDDHIST SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract

In this paper a comparison between Existentialism and Buddhism is investigated. The relationship is determined by comparing literature written in both fields of study. The focus of the paper concentrates on the importance of ontology, suffering, and death in both groups and how closely they relate to one another. The findings indicate that the spirituality of Buddhism and the psychology of Existentialism in combination, can culminate the experience of finding meaning in one’s life and the discovery of self through the therapeutic experience. The paper will also provide a historical overview of Buddha himself and a review of his basic teachings which is necessary due to the limited information available to the therapeutic audience.
The Comparison of Existential Psychology and Buddhist Spirituality

“Om mani padme hum” - Enlightenment is within all beings. This is the affirmation that Buddha wished for all people, that each would come to understand that in order to discover the essence of one’s life, one must discover the essence of one’s self. This is also the hope of those involved in psychotherapy, that by helping people to explore the problems that reside within, they will overcome the problems of suffering and achieve personal happiness. There is an intriguing symmetry between this twenty-five hundred-year-old Buddhist philosophy and the hundred-year-old field of psychotherapy. Alan Watts (1961) observed that Buddhism and psychotherapy are closely linked:

If we look deeply into such ways of life as Buddhism, we do not find either philosophy or religion as these is understood in the West.

We find something more resembling psychotherapy...The main resemblance between these Eastern ways of life and Western psychotherapy is in the concern of both with bringing about changes in our ways of dealing with our own existence and our relation to human society and the natural world. The psychotherapist has, for the most part, been interested in changing the consciousness of peculiarly disturbed individuals. The disciplines of Buddhism are, however, concerned with changing the consciousness of normal socially adjusted people. But it is increasingly apparent to psychotherapists that the normal state of consciousness in our culture are both the context and the breeding ground of mental health (p.3).

Buddhism and psychotherapy share significant similarity, the concern of mental
anguish and how to obtain relief from it. The most compelling similarities are found within the framework of Existential psychotherapy and Buddhism. Personal suffering and one’s anguish in dealing with the ultimate suffering of death are the foundations of both.

People seek therapy because they are dealing with painful emotions, thoughts and experiences. The negative emotions - anger, guilt, shame, frustration and depression are all forms of suffering. What clients want from their therapists is not a cure from an illness, but, like Buddhists, they want relief from their emotional traumas and a chance for some peace or happiness.

The focus of this paper will be to enlighten the reader to the significant similarities between Buddhism and psychotherapy from an existential standpoint. It will include a historical overview of Buddha himself and a review of his basic teachings. By presenting these ideas this paper will inform the reader that both traditions address the problems of human suffering and the ultimate suffering in life...one’s own death. It will show that the inferences of right mindfulness can lead to an end of mental anguish through meditative practices.

Who Was Buddha

He became known to the world as “Buddha”. The historical evidence of Buddha’s life reads like a fable, and Smith (1991) provided an excellent overview, which the following summarizes. Born Siddhartha Gautama in 563 B.C., he lived the early stages of his life in Northern India which would today be Nepal. Siddartha’s father was a king, and on the day of the birth, he consulted a fortuneteller concerning the future of his son. He was told that the son would be one of two things: he would either become an emperor
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or a savior of humanity. His father wanted him to be king and was determined that he be shielded from anything that would lead him on a spiritual path. On that day his father vowed that the prince would never be exposed to the sufferings and brutalities of the world. Strict orders were given to the palace servants that the prince should be sheltered from all that was ugly and disdainful.

Gautama led an extravagant life throughout early childhood. He continued to live in his palace surrounded by the privilege of his social class, but he was becoming increasingly restless. Gautama was curious about what the world was like beyond the palace walls.

When Siddhartha turned 29, he was allowed to travel by horseback beyond the palace gates. Servants were sent in advance of the ride to clear the roads of anything common place...the elderly, the sick or the dying. On that ride four people unexpectedly appeared on his path and the shield was broken. The first was an elderly man leaning on a staff, and Siddhartha learned about old age. The second encounter was a body racked with pain and disease, and the third was a corpse. Finally, he witnessed a monk and came to know the life of withdrawal from the world. He had come to realize what he should have been taught all along...that all of us get old, sick, and eventually die.

These exposures haunted him and he found that he could no longer enjoy the pampered life he had always known. He chose instead to devote his time and energy “to extricate himself from the universal despair that seemed to form from the very grounds of human existence” (Hagen, 1999, p.7). Siddhartha became an ascetic and detached himself from all worldly possessions. For six years he studied with the most respected teachers of his time and then ventured out on his own.
One evening he sat down and meditated under a bodhi tree and on the seventh night he experienced enlightenment. At last he came to understand the human problem, its origins, its ramifications, and its solutions. From that moment on Siddhartha became known as the Buddha (The Awakened One). He taught for 45 more years and died at the age of 80 from a spoiled meal given to him by a follower. His last words were “Impermanent are all created things, strive on with awareness” (Fields, 1989, p. 9).

Smith’s overview of the historical Buddha provides a simplistic look into the life of a man who became one of the world’s greatest teachers on how to overcome personal suffering and experience inner peace. This paper will now advance to the examination of Buddha’s teachings and how he provided the tools for individuals to use in their escape from mental and physical suffering.

Buddha’s Teachings

After Buddha achieved enlightenment under the bodhi tree, he returned to the world in order to teach his new found insights and help free humanity from their sufferings. It was the Buddha’s experience of enlightenment that became the foundations of all his teachings. The following is a description of the Buddha’s awakening in his own words:

“I realized the truth about the dissatisfactory condition of life...its nature, cause, cessation and path to its cessation...When I realized this, my mind was freed from the defilement of ignorance, from the defilement of suffering, and as I became free, I realized that I was free” (Mitchell, 2002, p.19).

According to Hagen (1999), Buddhism is about clearly examining the world, about testing everything and every idea. Buddhism is about freeing. It is about knowing rather than wishing or hoping. It’s about not being afraid to examine anything including ones
The Buddha’s teachings repeatedly emphasized the impossibility of arriving at the truth by giving up one’s own authority and following the path of others. Following another’s path would only lead to a loss of personal freedom. One’s authority would then be dictated by someone else. The sense of self would become a reserve for the sense of others.

The Buddha encouraged people to “know for themselves what is wrong.” According to Buddhism (Lester, 1987) when things are unwholesome, then give them up. When one knows for oneself that things are good, then accept them and follow them. The message of Buddhism is always to examine and see for oneself what is true; that is the only way that he/she can genuinely know anything.

Shortly after his awakenment, Buddha devised a contingency plan called the Four Noble Truths, which constitute the core of his teachings. These truths deal with the suffering that humanity faces - both of a physical and mental nature and they constitute the foundation of all Buddhist beliefs: The suffering in life; The causes of suffering; The end of suffering; The path leading to the end of suffering (Powers, 1995).

The Suffering in Life

According to Kornfield (1993), as people examine their own experiences or look at the world around them, they will see that life is full of suffering. This is the First Noble Truth. Being born is suffering, growing is suffering, illness is suffering, and dying is the ultimate suffering. Aside from physical pain, a person also experiences dissatisfaction in life or mental suffering, and much of this deals with the unhappiness of not having what he/she wants. There is anxiety of attachment, knowing that what one has could be lost or
taken away. There is also the fear of failure, loss of a job, a loved one, or a loss of self-worth. Then of course there is the ultimate suffering that one must not only deal with their personal demise and also the prospect of a meaningless existence.

**The Cause of Suffering**

The Buddha observed that life is suffering, but before he could find a solution to this problem, he first had to examine its cause. This is the Second Noble Truth. Buddha discovered that the direct causes of suffering are desire and ignorance.

By desire, Buddhists refer to craving pleasure, material goods and immorality, all of which are wants that can never be satisfied. As a result, desiring them can only bring suffering. Lester (1987) related that it is easy to see how desire or cravings cause mental stress. If something or someone a person is emotionally attached to is taken away there is the anguish of grief and loss. Ignorance, in comparison, is related to not seeing the world as it really is. According to the Buddhist philosophy, without the capacity for mental concentration and insight, one’s mind is left underdeveloped, unable to grasp the true nature of things. Vices such as greed, envy, hatred and anger stem from this ignorance.

**The End of Suffering**

After Buddha determined the causes of suffering, he then began to explore how to end it. Simply stated, the Third Noble Truth is that if desire is the cause of suffering, then freeing oneself of desire is freeing oneself of suffering (Lester, 1987). This truth was the final goal of Buddha’s teachings. Buddha believed that everyone could experience the end of suffering. As an example, Kornfield (1993) stated that when greed and anger arise in one’s mind, one experiences unhappiness. When thoughts of greed and anger cease, one’s mind becomes happy and peaceful. To end suffering, one must remove desire, ill
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will and ignorance.

Buddha explained that when one reaches the end of suffering a person enters a state of Nirvana. Nirvana has been explained as a supreme happiness and enlightenment. Lester (1987) described Nirvana as a freedom like no other - a freedom from rebirth, old age and death. It is a blissful state that can only be defined as a pure absence of suffering and can only be achieved and experience for and by oneself.

As stated earlier in this paper, the young Prince Siddhartha enjoyed the indulgences of pleasure in his father’s palace. Later, when he renounced the worldly life and became an ascetic, he experienced the hardships of torturing his mind and body. Finally, after attaining enlightenment, he realized the fruitlessness in regards to these two extremes (Smith, 1991). Buddha describes this life as the middle path. This is the final and Fourth Noble Truth, the path that leads to the end of suffering.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) compared these three ways of life to the different tensions on a lute. The loose string, which is like a life of indulgence, produces a poor sound when struck. The overly tight string, which is like a life of extreme asceticism, similarly produces a poor sound when struck and is likely to break at any moment. Only the middle string, which is like the middle path and produces a pleasant and harmonious sound when struck. Those who follow the middle path, avoid the extreme of over indulging in one’s desires and the opposite extreme of unreasonably torturing one’s mind and body and therefore will find happiness and peace of mind.

The Buddha recognized the sickness of suffering. He identified its causes and discovered its cure. Then for the benefit of mankind, the Buddha put his discoveries into a systematic formula to rid humanity from suffering. This formula includes both physical
and mental treatment. It is called the Eight Fold Path. The Eight Fold Path consists of
the following eight factors: Right Understanding; Right Intent; Right Speech; Right
Conduct; Right Livelihood; Right Effort; Right Mindfulness; Right Concentration
(Drummond, 1974).

For the purpose of this paper the focus of research will be on the seventh factor,
Right Mindfulness, which is the tool Buddha espoused that most closely relates to
psychotherapy.

Right Mindfulness

According to Smith (1991) no teacher has credited the mind with more influence over
life than did the Buddha (p. 109). The most admired of all Buddhist texts, the
Dhammapada, opens with the words, “All we are is the result of what we have thought”
(p. 5). Right Mindfulness presents the idea that by mastering our psyche, all things
become possible.

Spinoza, a western philosopher, stated that to understand something is to be delivered
from it (Safire, 1989). This quote provides a summarization of Buddha’s entire works.
Buddha believed that when a person truly understood his/herself, problems would
diminish and eventually come to a resolution. Carl Rogers, a humanistic theorist of
psychology, had a similar assumption. Rogers stated that when “awareness of experience
is fully operating human behavior is to be trusted, for in these moments the human
organism becomes aware of its delicacy and tenderness towards others’ (as cited in

Sogyal Rinpoche (1995) provided a clear understanding of Right Mindfulness. He
expressed that the practice of mindfulness is like bring the scattered mind home.
“Mindfulness brings the different aspects of our being into focus, and is called peacefully remaining or calm abiding. All the fragmented aspects of ourselves, which had been at war, settle and dissolve and become friends. In that settling we begin to understand ourselves more, and sometimes even have glimpses of the radiance of our fundamental nature” (p. 351).

The following metaphor reflects a good illustration of mindfulness:

A monk was being chased by a tiger and ended up at the edge of a cliff. At this point the monk was left with two choices, he could either be eaten by the tiger or jump to his death from the cliff. At the moment of his leap, he grasped a vine that was growing over the edge. Swinging back and forth over the great chasm a mouse began to gnaw at the vine. At that moment the monk saw a wild strawberry growing out of the cliff. He picked it, ate it and exclaimed how delicious the strawberry was. (Boorstein, 1997, p. 61)

Right Mindfulness is achieved by a person detaching from material things and gaining control over one’s thoughts, feelings and emotions. It is a state of continuous awareness of what is happening within oneself. At each moment one becomes aware of his or her true existence and mental suffering is extinguished.

The next aspect of this paper will focus on how these teachings of Buddha can be integrated with Existential psychotherapy. The importance of this information is to explore one’s ability to come to terms with his/her sufferings and the ultimate suffering - death.

The Assimilation of Existential Psychotherapy and Buddhism

Fundamental suffering manifests itself as psychological symptoms that are described
in the DSM-IV reference of psychopathology (American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 2000). Depression, panic attacks, anxiety, addictions and suicide are among the hundreds of diagnosis found within its contents. It is regarding these symptoms of suffering that Buddhism and Existential psychotherapy meet.

**Personal Suffering**

Viktor Frankl, an existential therapist, survived the concentration camps in Auschwitz. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* Frankl (1984) relates how he suffered the loss of everything human’s consider to be of value, yet he found in himself a life worth living. He felt that if he were to succumb to the tragedy that the Nazi’s caused that his life would have meant nothing (Frankl, 1984). In his own word's Frankl (1984) expressed the following:

> To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering. If there is a life at all, there must be a purpose in suffering and dying. But no man can tell another what this purpose is. Each must find out for himself, and must accept the responsibility that his answer prescribes. If he succeeds he will continue to grow spite of all indignities (p. 97).

Both the psychological and spiritual representation signify that suffering is a part of life and how one deals with personal anguish either inclines one give up on a situation or to experience a sense of growth and personal reflection. The Dalai Lama, the secular head of Tibet and leader of Buddhism, was confronted with the trauma of his people being deposed by the Chinese government in 1959. At this time the Dalai Lama was forced into exile along with 100,000 of his followers into India. During his exile he
devoted his life to his fellow refugees and promoted world peace through an unwavering policy of non-violence. For his actions he was awarded the 1989 Noble Peace Prize (Batan’ Dzi-Rgy-Mtsho, 1990). The Dalai Lama and his followers endured extreme suffering. They too, like Frankl, lost all of their earthly belongings, along with family and friends who were persecuted to death, yet they did not give up and continue to this day to rise above the torment. When the Dalai Lama was asked how he was able to endure the daily anxiety he felt himself and for his people, he calmly stated that the ocean above may be rough and tumble, but at its deepest point it remains calm and serene (Batan’ Dzi-Rgy-Mtsho, 1990). So it is that one who is enlightened knows that suffering is a normal part of life. By coming to terms with this prospect, one is able to bring the suffering into a state of calm and acceptance, according to the Dalai Lama.

Buddhist thought contends that suffering is caused by ignorance and that people inflict pain on others in pursuit of their own happiness or satisfaction (Rinpoche, 1984). Yet, as in Existential psychology, Buddhism believes true happiness comes from a sense of inner peace, contentment and a true awareness of self. According to Buddhism, fundamentally we are all human beings; we all seek happiness and try to avoid suffering (Cutler, 1998). All of us want freedom and the right to determine our own destiny as individuals. This is human nature. According to Yalom (1980), Existential psychology also discusses ignorance. Everyone holds belief systems—personal and social—that remain forever untested by direct experience. People have such staying power because built into each of us is a catch-22, a circular argument, that says that evidence or reasoning that threatens the belief system is incorrect. These belief systems can range from religious, political, and economic theories to the little beliefs people hold that tell
them that they are or are not worthy. It is part of a therapist’s job to return a person to a more direct awareness of reality. As Fritz Perls once said, “We must lose our minds to come to our senses” (as cited in Corey, 2001. p. 192).

**Ontology**

The relationship between Existentialism and the writings of Buddha is that of ontology (Yalom, 1980). Both are endeavors for a person to grasp reality and learn from the choices made and the suffering and anxiety endured. Duhka, the Sanskrit word for suffering, is also translated as stress and anxiety. Buddha wanted people to understand suffering is the foundation for improvement. Ontological anxiety is often spoke of in Existential psychology. It too, is characterized as an intrinsic part of life. It is further understood that in order to improve one’s life, one needs to understand and accept this fact of life, and that the effort one makes at avoiding this fact is at the root of neurosis. To quote Laotzu’s *The Way of Life,* “The way to do is to be, rather abide at the center of your being for the more you leave it the less you learn” (as cited in Rinpoche, 1995, p. 24). It is here; inside oneself that one finds meaning and purpose in life. T. S. Elliot’s poem (Elliott, 1938), “The Hollow Man” brings to mind how lost and meaningless one can feel in life.

We are the Hollow men

We are stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw, Alas!

Our dried voices, when

We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass.
Or rats’ feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar (p. 52)

One is always being confronted by the hollow man. Constant fear is being afraid to look at one’s self, afraid of what one will see, one’s own suffering, one’s end. The person who is willing to be uninhibited can open him/herself to a positive and healthy way of life. When one begins to know oneself, one can begin to truly live in this world. As Sartre (1987) put it, our existences precede our essences. That is to say, we are a kind of nothingness that strains to become something.

Death and Dying

In order to understand purpose, one must also be totally aware of the absolute suffering, that of death. Society has taught that death takes away, but in Buddhism and Existential therapy, death is explored as a giver of meaning. According to Yalom (1980), after the age of forty, clients seek more therapy for dealing with death then any other issue. Existential therapists hold that the confronting of death gives the most positive reality to life itself. It makes the individual existence real, absolute and concrete. So why is it so hard for people to think about dying? Sogyal Rinpoche, in The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying stated:

Perhaps the deepest reason why we are afraid of death is because we do not know who we are. We believe in a personal, unique, and separate identity; but if we dare to examine it, we find that this identity depends entirely on an endless collection of things to prop it up: our name, our “biography”, our partners, family,
home, job, friends, credit cards...It is on their fragile and transient support that we rely for our security. So when they are all taken away, will we have any idea of who we really are (p. 16)?

Death is the ultimate suffering. It is the one fact of life that is not relative but absolute, and the awareness of this gives existence each hour an absolute quality.

The reaction to death is that individuals try to deny that it exists. Death is considered as something horrible and ugly. Both Buddhism and Existentialism have taken a much different course. Their thoughts conceptualize that people form their own destinies; in every moment there are opportunities for mental advancements. Death, it is felt, presents individuals with a range of possibilities for progress (Yalom, 1980).

Viktor Frankl (1984) summed up how people should live their lives. “Live as if you were living for a second time and had acted as wrongly the first time as you are about to act now” (p.151). When Frankl was in the Nazi Concentration Camps he frequently counseled other prisoners. He told his comrades that human life never ceased to have meaning and that this meaning included suffering and dying (Frankl, 1984). So it is whatever we have done with our lives makes us what we are when we die, and everything, absolutely everything, counts.

Conclusion

Buddhism and Existential psychotherapy share a similar ground of concern with suffering, and the means of relief and finally the release of suffering. This is the foundation of both. Buddha began his spiritual quest when he became aware of suffering and dedicated his life to finding the cause and cure for it. From both the Buddhist and Existential point of view, life’s journey begins with the awareness of suffering and it is
motivated by the desire to escape it and find happiness.

When east meets west, one is found to be at the center. It is here that the individual sees the core of one’s being, the self. It is at this center that Buddhism and Existentialism share a common boundary of coming to an understanding and truth of who we are as a person. Both signify that from our conception in the womb to the deception we feel as we approach the end, we are not hollow men but rather each and every one of us, an individual. By combining Buddhist and Existential concepts, the therapeutic process can take an individual to a level beyond suffering, allowing one to engage in self-exploration, self-awareness and ultimately in finding a purpose in life if he/she chooses.

This paper has discussed but a few of the similarities that Buddhism and Existential psychotherapy share. Undoubtedly there are more, but many of the shared concepts have not worked their way into main stream literature. Most of the comparative information of the two subjects was found on web sites. Very little research has been done since the early nineties. Additional research could be more thorough by further integrating the two philosophies and applying it to the practice of counseling.
References


