

The Self and the Non-Self: Applications of Buddhist Philosophy in Psychotherapy

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Psychological approaches to treating mental illness or improving psychological wellbeing are invariably based on the explicit or implicit understanding that there is an intrinsically existing 'self' or 'I' entity. In other words, regardless of whether a cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic, or humanistic psychotherapy treatment model is employed, these approaches are ultimately concerned with changing how the 'I' relates to its thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, and/or to its physical, social, and spiritual environment. Although each of these psychotherapeutic modalities have been shown to have utility for improving psychological health, there are inevitably limitations to their effectiveness and there will always be those individuals for whom they are incompatible. Given such limitations, research continuously attempts to identify and empirically validate more effective, acceptable and/or diverse treatment approaches. One such approach gaining momentum is the use of techniques that derive from Buddhist contemplative practice. Although mindfulness is arguably the most popular and empirically researched example, there is also growing interest into the psychotherapeutic applications of Buddhism's 'non-self' ontological standpoint (in which ontology is basically the philosophical study of the nature or essence of being, existence, or reality).

Within Buddhism, the term 'non-self' refers to the realisation that the 'self' or the 'I' is absent of inherent existence. On first inspection, this might seem to be a somewhat abstract concept but it is actually common sense and the principle of 'non-self' is universal in its application. For example, Buddhism teaches that the human body comprises the five elements of water, wind (i.e., air), earth (i.e., food), sun (i.e., heat/energy), and space (i.e., in the bodily cavities and between molecules, etc.). This means that although the body exists in the relative sense, it does not exist in the absolute sense because the body cannot be isolated from all of its contributing causes. Just as a wave does not exist in separation from the ocean, the body does not exist in separation from all other phenomena. According to the Buddhist teachings, when looking at the body, we should also be able to see the trees, plants, animals, clouds, rivers, oceans, planets, and so forth. Thus, the body, and indeed the entire array of animate and inanimate phenomena that we know of, cannot be found to exist intrinsically or independently.

The Buddhist teachings go on to assert that suffering, including the entire spectrum of distressing emotions and psychopathologic states (including 'addiction'), results from adhering to a false view about the ultimate manner in which the self (and reality more generally) exists. As a means of operationalising this notion within Western psychological and clinical domains, we recently introduced the concept of 'ontological addiction'. Ontological addiction can effectively be considered a new category of addiction (i.e., in addition to what are typically called chemical addictions and behavioural addictions) and we have previously defined it as "**the unwillingness to relinquish an erroneous and deep-rooted belief in an inherently existing 'self' or 'I' as well as the 'impaired functionality' that arises from such a belief**". Due to a firmly-embedded (yet scientifically and logically implausible) belief that the self is an inherent and independently existing entity, Buddhism asserts that afflictive mental states arise as a result of the imputed 'self' incessantly craving after objects it considers to be attractive or harbouring aversion towards objects it considers to be unattractive.

In Buddhist terminology, this process is known as 'attachment' and it is deemed to be an undesirable quality that reinforces ontological addiction. We have previously defined attachment as "**the over-allocation of cognitive and emotional resources towards a particular object, construct, or idea to the extent**

that the object is assigned an attractive quality that is unrealistic and that exceeds its intrinsic worth". Thus, attachment takes on a different meaning in Buddhism in relation to its construction in Western psychology where attachment (i.e., in the context of relationships) is generally considered to exert a protective influence over psychopathology.

Having understood from a Buddhist perspective that attachment (and harbouring an erroneous belief in an inherently existing self) is not advisable for adaptive psycho-spiritual functioning, Buddhism teaches that the next step towards recovery from ontological addiction is to embrace 'non-self' and begin deconstructing our mistaken belief regarding the existence of an 'I'. Based on this Buddhist approach, a number of novel psychotherapeutic techniques have recently been developed that integrate meditative practices aimed at cultivating an understanding of the 'non-self' construct. For example, Buddhist Group Therapy is a six-week program that has been shown to be effective for treating anxiety and depression. Another example is an intervention we developed called Meditation Awareness Training (MAT). MAT is an eight-week secular program that, in a number of separately published studies, has been shown to be an effective treatment for individuals with anxiety and depression, schizophrenia, pathological gambling, workaholics, work-related stress, and fibromyalgia.

From a mechanistic point of view, greater awareness of 'non-self' is believed to assist in gradually uprooting egoistic core beliefs and can complement therapeutic techniques that work at the surface level of behaviour and cognition. Furthermore, an understanding of non-self can enhance therapeutic core conditions because **the more the therapist understands and embodies the concept of non-self, the less likelihood that the therapy will be about the selfhood of the therapist.**

For some, Buddhist concepts such as non-self may be difficult to conceptually grasp and reflect what might be seen as a paradigm shift when compared with well-established Western psychological beliefs regarding the ego and the self. As such, psychotherapists will carefully need to assess the suitability of utilising 'non-self' meditative techniques for their own clients. Although further empirical evaluation of these new approaches is required, preliminary findings indicate that techniques aimed at cultivating an awareness of the Buddhist 'non-self' construct may have applications in psychotherapy settings.

Further Reading

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Acknowledgement

This article is adapted from content that was first published by the authors on the Meditation Practice and Research Blog at www.edoshonin.com