Buddhism and Psychodrama:

Selected Correspondences

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This article is a selective discussion of correspondences between selected concepts and methods of psychodrama, and between notable philosophical ideas and meditation practices of Buddhism. From psychodrama these include primarily role reversal, role theory, spiritual psychodramatic roles and world sociometry. From Buddhism, focus is on the emptiness of self and deity meditation practices of *Vajrayana* (diamond vehicle) Buddhism.

KEYWORDS: Role reversal; role theory; world sociometry; emptiness of self; Vajrayana.

For those readers with little or no previous acquaintance with Buddhism, we will begin with a brief selective overview. In our present historical era, the essential manifestation of Buddhism came some 2,600 years ago in the form of an Indian prince who became imbued with tremendous compassion for the sufferings of all living beings. In order to help them he embarked on a quest to perfect all of the most positive desirable qualities imaginable. When he arrived at this awareness, he became *Shakyamuni Buddha* (Sanskrit [Sk.] "The fully-realized enlightened sage of the *Shakya* clan"). It is from the transmission and elaboration of his teachings that the present teachings and practices of Buddhism derive.

Shakyamuni's teachings lay out the path for those wishing to follow his example through three major systems of meditation, study, and action called *yanas* (Sk. "vehicles" or "chariots"): the *Hinayana, Mahayana* and *Varjayana* (Sk. "smaller vehicle," "greater vehicle," and "diamond, or indestructible vehicle"). Each can serve as a path to perfection. Their differences exist to take into account differences in personal psychology and learning styles among individuals due to the personal level of their individual *karma* (Sk. "action"). Following the Hinayana, one's goal is to achieve enlightenment, or liberation from all the conditions of suffering on the personal level. Following the Mahayana, one works to achieve enlightenment for all living beings, which I personally explain by the

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phrase "letting everybody else get on the elevator first." In the Vajrayana, one takes as the object of meditation a particular form of fully enlightened meditation deity. Through the chanting of that deity's *mantra*, or sacred name, one aims to achieve complete and perfect union with the deity. The late *Kalu Rinpoche*, a high-ranking Tibetan teacher from the *Karma Kagyu* practice lineage, offers a succinct description of the three yanas using the analogy of different ways of traveling from New York to Los Angeles: Hinayana is like walking from New York to Los Angeles, Mahayana is like taking a car, and Vajrayana is like taking a jet plane (Rinpoche, 1995).

The laws, or necessary conditions of karma, exist for all living beings who have not yet realized the perfection of Buddha—that is, a fully enlightened being. Briefly, the essence of karma is that all actions on whatever scale have consequences for both the actor(s) and those acted upon. This is due to the essential reality that all beings and phenomena are interdependent, even though to unenlightened beings, they may seem separate and independent. Colloquially, we may express the conditions of karma as "for anything you've thought or done, payback is coming—for sure!—if not in this lifetime, then definitely in another." Thus, practitioners of Buddhism aim to cultivate increasing awareness of both the effects of their behavior and expression on others, and to appreciate more deeply the impact of others' behavior and expression on themselves.

In the context of psychodrama, this translates to heightened awareness of roles and role interactions. Moreover, karma is an essential characteristic of all levels of phenomena, not just the action fields between or among individual persons. One can contemplate and investigate the operations of karma on living beings at both the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels. Thus, it is illuminating to think of karma as an all-pervasive field or web in constant flux due to the reciprocal actions and reactions of interdependent beings who have not yet reached perfected awareness. In this regard, it requires very little imaginative stretch to see that Moreno's concept of the phenomenon of *tele* is equivalent to karma in fields of human interaction.

In contrast, a fully enlightened Buddha is beyond karma because such a being acts immediately and spontaneously out of omniscient perfect compassion, beyond action and reaction. Therefore, this entity is incapable of causing harm to another being and thus accumulating karma. In the fully enlightened field of phenomena, tele could be said to be all-pervasive and infinite.

There are two other notable ways in which Buddhist beliefs and psychology correlate with and impact psychodramatic theory and practice. The first is mind/heart of enlightened compassion with Moreno's vision of world sociometry. Here I prefer the expression "mind/heart" as a more accurate English equivalent to the Buddhist term that usually is translated as "mind" because Buddhist practice typically locates it in the heart center of the physical body. The second correlation is the Buddhist concept of emptiness with the psychodramatic method of role reversal.

One of the chief obstacles both to understanding the conceptual frameworks of Buddhism and psychodrama and to discovering correspondences between them is that both systems are essentially experiential, not conceptual. On the surface, the

practice of action methods primarily in a group environment and the solitary practice of silent meditation might appear to be contradictory. This ignores the reality that a significant amount of Buddhist practice in the Vajrayana (aka Mantrayana "vehicle of mantra") system consists of group chanting. The fundamental aim of both is to produce spontaneous realizations and insights that lead the individual to progressively more integrated states of mind.

Emptiness is one of the most prominent and most often misunderstood elements of Buddhist philosophy. Misunderstandings are partly due to inadequate translation, but also to unfamiliarity with practices. The translation problem is often due to a truncation of the relevant formulation in Sanskrit, which in English is "empty of independent, or self-referential existence." Thus, Buddhist emptiness does not mean that the self or any phenomena of the world we perceive with our five senses is pure nothing. Rather, it means that the phenomena we view as apparently separate and distinct are not so. Regarding what we call the self, all too often people regard it as immutable, having independent reality and ultimately being a possession that belongs to themselves alone. In contrast, the Buddhist concept of emptiness posits that this so-called self has no inherent or enduring reality. We can't grasp it, let alone hold onto it.

However, much of the time we behave *as if* we can. This view of self as independent too often leads to very unsatisfying consequences. Belief in the self as an enduring and coherent entity means that others exist separate from one's self and can therefore be viewed as independent objects. This provides the groundwork for appropriation, attempting to grasp the other to oneself as an object of desire, or for separation, pushing the other away as an object of repulsion—that is, becoming immersed in the endless web of projecting others as friends or enemies, lovers or hostiles, allies or threats.

Buddhist philosophy holds the converse, that all phenomena in the universe are interdependent and mutually coexistent. From this perspective, the path to genuine lasting happiness and mutually satisfying harmonious relationships is to let go of the fiction of self and foster awareness and appreciation of our connections with all other living beings. One of the often-used meditative techniques for achieving this goal is that known as "exchanging self and others." It is described, for example, by the 11th century Buddhist monk Santideva (Santideva, 2006). This is, in fact, the imaginative technique of role reversal. Knowing that role reversal has a long and honorable history even before Moreno created it as an action method provides psychodramatists with the positive weight of a well-defined and honorable body of spiritual beliefs and practices stretching back at least to the 5th century B.C. Indeed, making this correspondence explicit provides us with a wider foundation and the satisfaction of realizing that the arsenal of our methodology is a powerful means for enhancing traditional sitting meditation practices.

Psychodramatic role theory enables us to approach the realization of emptiness by viewing the so-called fictional self not an independent entity but as a dynamic system of interacting parts, which from Moreno we call *roles* (Z. T. Moreno, 1987). As we investigate the systems of roles through action methods, we discover that our own role repertoire, and correspondingly that of others, is

increasingly diverse, complex, and in constant flux. Indeed, we can encounter the prospect that our happiness and satisfaction derive from interacting with others through mutual positive and beneficial role-pairs. We also realize the range of roles through which we are capable of interacting is limited only by our own imagination, and that through spontaneous explorations in the psychodramatic laboratory we can create an increasing variety of roles in both the interpersonal and intrapsychic fields—in other words, the apparent "outer world" of personal and group relationships, and the so-called "inner world" of imagination, or in Moreno's terms, *surplus reality*.

A major goal of Buddhism is the cultivation, first as internal attitude and then as practice in action through behavior and moral conduct of the mind/heart of enlightenment (Sk. *Bodhicitta*). A being who has achieved this state is known as a *Bodhisattva*. The principal foundation for developing this awareness (Lama-Dalai, 2001) is through generating compassion, not only for oneself, but for all human beings, and ultimately for all living beings of whatever form.

The core practice of *Vajrayana* (diamond vehicle) Buddhism, as noted above, is meditation on a fully enlightened being, who becomes manifest in some particular form. Through repeated chanting of the mantra, which is the sacred name of the deity manifesting through sound, the meditator essentially role-reverses back and forth with the deity to accomplish union. The psychodrama version of this process involves concretizing the deity in the form of a psychodramatic role in order to interact with that role through dialogue and role reversal. Among the enactments that I have used is an encounter with the deity role to introduce the latter into one's psychodramatic role repertoire. Another involved using one or more deity roles as double(s) during encounter with a difficult antagonist role in order to pacify anger or guilt and eventually to shift roles into a more compassionate and mutually cooperative relationship. A third consisted of using an extended encounter with the "fully enlightened healer" in the form of the medicine Buddha in order to explore and expand one's own therapist/healer role. In these ways, Vajrayana practice offers excellent possibilities for expanding one's field of surplus reality and enriching role repertoire through action methods.

Moreover, one of the principal Buddhist meditation techniques begins with generating compassion for friends, for strangers, and for (perceived) enemies. These meditations correspond with the basic levels of tele, namely, attraction, neutrality/indifference, and repulsion. In the latter two instances, generating compassion corresponds to practicing a role shift. To the extent the practice is successful, the meditator is actually replacing that role, which creates a relationship marked by indifference or rejection, which generates irritation, frustration, or anger, with a compassionate, empathetic role. Although the meditator may not be aware of this level of the process, this role shift is achieved through increasingly complete role reversal.

Moreover, such a process carried out extensively also leads to increasing awareness of the interdependence of human beings, and ultimately all living beings. This is entirely consonant with Moreno's vision of world sociometry. That vision is expressed the familiar opening line of his seminal work on sociometry,

Who Shall Survive? "A truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind . . . mankind is a social and organic unity" (J. L. Moreno, 2018, p. 3). A more evocative expression of this concept, in my view, can be found in Moreno's parable of a physician setting out to treat a man in a certain village but who can never reach him:

> But how is it that I didn't reach yet the place in which he lives? That is why: between the place from which I parted and the place where he lives are many countries and each country through which I pass has several counties. And every county has so many villages. And every village has more than a hundred or more than thousand souls. And *every soul which I meet needs my attention*. (J. L. Moreno, 2018, p. 426, emphasis added)

With these observations, I conclude for the present this modest glimpse into correspondences between psychodrama and sociometry and Buddhist thought and practice. The remaining investigations are left to be carried out in spontaneous action sessions.

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