

How to Reduce Your Mental Agony to obtain a Healthy Life: A Buddhist Perspective.

Ven. Rideegama Wanarathana (*)

Whenever certain difficulties and problems arise, make up your mind to reduce your mental agony. First, you must try to understand the nature of the world where you live. You can never expect everything in this world to be perfect and to run smoothly. The world situation may not always be in your favour.¹ There could be no world and no life without problems.

Natural forces like sunlight, rain, wind and moonlight are favourable and useful to many, yet at times, they could be a nuisance to many others. There is, in fact, nothing perfectly bad or perfectly good in this world because the very things that are welcomed by one group could be hated by another group. Therefore we define good and bad according to our needs.

(*) B.A (Hons.), M.A. (Kel), M.A.(BPU)
Visiting Lecturer - Department of Buddhist Studies
Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka
+94779730801 / revridigama@gmail.com
1. jatakapali 111, P. 26 P.T.S

If you have strong selfish cravings for existence and the senses, you will have to pay the price – the mental agony of having to survive with a topsy-turvy view of the world. Wishful thinking, yearnings for eternity and clinging to feelings such as “I” or “Me” only warp the mind and its sense of time. Unfulfilled desires yield their crop of quarrels, friction, communication, failures, worry, loneliness, and anxiety.

If you are desirous or eradicating the mental agony within you. One way to relieve yourself of occasional mental agony is to understand the degree of your own sufferings and difficulties compared with those experienced by others. When you are unhappy, you often feel that the world is against you. You think that everything around you is about to collapse. You feel that the end of the road is near. However, if you make a mental note of things around you and count your blessings, surprisingly, you will find that you are indeed much better off than many other people.

Problems are there. You should try to solve them instead of worrying and creating mental anguish within you. The Chinese have a practical saying about solving problems: “If you have a big problem, try to reduce it to a small problem. If you have a small problem, try to reduce it to no problem.”²

Another way to reduce your mental anguish is to recap what you have gone through before, under similar or worse circumstances; and how you have, through your own patience, initiative and effort been able to surmount your difficulties. By doing so, you will not permit your existing problem to drown you. On the contrary, by seeing life in a new perspective, you will be able to solve whatever problems you may now be facing. With this frame of mind, you will soon regain your self-confidence and be in a better position to solve whatever problems that may be in store for you.

Buddhism originated in India. It was there that Sakyamuni Buddha began to deal with the problem of illness. Illness begins at birth; when one is born, the peril of sickness begins. The person who has not suffered illness has yet to be born. Only after death does illness

2. The Filial Piety Sutra. Zeang Leng P. 67

cease. We must suffer both mental and physical pain and illness in this life. Buddha said that we should see a doctor for physical illness, but mental illness should be treated with Buddhadharma.

Buddha saw that it was more important to save the mind than the body. One who has a healthy mind and a good attitude will be much less afflicted by physical difficulty than someone who has mental problems. If all of our mental problems are cured, that is liberation. One with a healthy body but a sick mind will suffer much more than someone who only has physical problems.

In Buddhism there are five kinds of mental agony (vexation): greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance,³ and doubt. When we are distressed, we can try to analyze the nature of our vexation. When we can determine into which category our vexation falls, and then reflect on it, we can greatly reduce its intensity. When we are distressed by greed, we may reflect: “I am greedy, I have strong desires.” Then the vexation of greed will automatically diminish.

When we suffer from anger, we may reflect: “Why am I so angry? My distress is directly related to my anger.” In this way the anger and distress will begin to subside. You look inward, not outward. It is not the problem but your own mind that you examine.

When we have done something stupid and we feel miserable about it, it is best for us to see what we have done for what it is. If it is something stupid, then reflect: “I have acted in a stupid way.” Thus will your suffering and vexation lessen.

Similarly, arrogance is itself a kind of suffering. To be aware of such feelings when you have them, will enable you to overcome them.

Doubt is also a type of suffering. Doubt will prevent you from making decisions. You will not be able to trust others and you will not be able to trust yourself. This is suffering indeed. If you know you suffer from doubt, you should reason as follows: “I want to accomplish such and such task, so I had better believe that I have the ability and that it is

3. Sabbasawa sutta, Majjima Nikaya 11, p 6, P. T. S

the right thing to do.” If you really believe this, you will be able to accomplish whatever you wish to do.

Doubt can be an invidious influence in our lives. Imagine a man who has decided to get married, but is plagued by doubt. He wonders if the marriage will end in divorce, will she abandon him after the marriage has begun, or did she lie or has she withheld something important from him. If this doubt is unchecked, he will be miserable at the prospect of marriage and miserable within the marriage. Even if there was no real cause for the couple to break up, the doubt itself can furnish the reason and result in marital problems.

If you have such doubts, you should say to yourself: “If I really have so many doubts, it would be foolish for me to marry. If I want to marry, I should accept her as she is and trust her absolutely.” If you cannot maintain such an attitude, you would be better off single, for marriage would only bring you misery.

According to Buddhism, there are five general causes of mental disturbance:

1. Pursuit of a given objective without considering your strengths and weaknesses. A variation of this is that you are not aware of the resources that you have and that you are never satisfied. Or when faced with a situation that is beyond your control, you are constantly tormented by the desire to resist the inevitable. Many people, especially the young, believe that they have unlimited potential. What they see others have done, they believe that they, too, can do. But when adverse conditions arise, they feel personally wronged, and resist rather than understand what is happening.

2. An insatiable desire to expand and conquer. Someone with this disturbance always wishes to magnify what he or she has. Such people wish to extend their influence beyond all limits. Some strive for fame so that they will be known to the world. Others use power to directly conquer those who oppose them. Power struggles such as these may occur among nations or simply within families. A wife may try to conquer a husband, or vice versa. Such desire to overpower others is indeed a mental disturbance.

3. Having achieved a particular objective or station, arrogance sets

in. This may lead to callousness and a general disregard for others. An arrogant person may believe that he or she has the right to hurt others or sweep them aside according to personal whim.

4. Failure to achieve a goal leads to despair. Someone with this disturbance may tend to be greatly discouraged and lose all confidence in himself or herself. There will be a tendency to blame others.

5. Doubt pervades the mind. There is a profound sense of insecurity. Confidence quickly evaporates.

Now I explain about how we can deal with balancing the mind and the treatment of mental agony.

People often confront their own mental disturbances by using two ineffective methods. The first is denial: "I am not sick. I have no problems. There is nothing wrong with me." The second is self-treatment: a continual review in one's mind of a list of faults and what one believes to be their remedies. This builds one false assumption on another. Both of these methods only make matters worse and more serious.

Psychiatrists and psychologists use a talking method to analyze and help explain their patients' problems. Although it is true that the aim of this method is to have the patient come to his or her own realization, from the standpoint of Buddha dharma this is incomplete and temporary. This is because the doctor can discover only a part of your problem and you yourself can only know a part but not the complete picture of your illness. And it often happens that problems reoccur after counseling, and sometimes a patient continues in therapy for ten or twenty years with no real resolution. This might be enough to make the doctor sick.

The Buddhist method of healing is divided into two broad categories: change of concepts and methods of practice.

A. CHANGE OF CONCEPTS

1. The concept of cause and effect

While this concept is a religious belief, it is also a fact. It is a fact because throughout our lives, no matter what we do, there will

be a response or an effect to our actions. Through faith we believe that there was a life before this life and one before that and so on through innumerable past lives. Much of what we experience now may seem unfair, but it is simply a consequence of actions we have performed in the past. To the extent that we believe this, we will be willing to accept what befalls us, good and bad.⁴

2. The concept of causes and conditions

All phenomena arise and pass away because of the accumulation and interaction of different factors. The cause of a flower is the seed, but soil, water, and sun must be present for the plant to come into existence. Time, or uprooting, or lack of water or sun will cause the plant to wither and die.

When we have succeeded in something, there is no need for us to be particularly excited or arrogant. No matter how much we have accomplished, it was not without the direct or indirect help of many other people. And since we know that which is now coming into being will one day pass away, there is no need to despair when we encounter adverse or unfavorable conditions. As the proverb says, “It is always darkest before the dawn.”

A calm mind will get us past unhappiness or elation. This is a sign of psychological health.

3. Compassion

People usually wish others to be compassionate towards them, but the idea seldom occurs to them to be compassionate towards others. There are those who when they make a mistake demand to be forgiven: “Don’t measure me against the standards of a saint!” they say. But if they see someone else err they will say, “You’re incompetent. Why couldn’t you do it right in the first place?”

Compassion requires four criteria:

Understanding of one’s own conflicts and the development of inner harmony.

4. Dhammapadaya, Narada Thero, 338

- Sympathy for other people's shortcomings.
- Forgiveness of other people's mistakes.
- Concern with other people's suffering.

The first criterion is especially important. In order to be at peace with yourself, you must have a calm and peaceful mind.

To do this, keep in mind the concepts of cause and effect and cause and conditions. This will give you a calm and peaceful mind. You will then be able to be compassionate, sympathetic, forgiving, and caring towards others.

B. METHODS OF PRACTICE.

1. Meditation

Sitting meditation can collect the scattered mind and stabilize a disturbed mind. There are many methods of meditation as well as levels of attainment, which we do not have time to go into in great detail. However, I can give you an idea of some of the more profound stages you might experience:⁵

When you reach the point where there are no wandering thoughts in your mind, that is called samadhi. In that state there is no one and no problem that can bring you vexation. From the point of samadhi you can develop the wisdom of no-self. This is enlightenment in Buddhism. To reach enlightenment is to be free of mental agony and illness. At the point when you are always in this state and you do not fall back, that is called Great Enlightenment. Short of that is Small Enlightenment. Your old problems may arise after you have reached this point, but you will know how to deal with them. Even Small Enlightenment is a significant step. But remember that even when you first begin to meditate that is a very important step, also.

5. A Critical Analysis of Janas, H. Gunarathana Thero, P84