

Uses and Abuses of the Buddha's Dhamma in Healing, Psychotherapy and Counselling

Questions [Q] posed by Bhikkhu Ākāśakusala and answered by the Venerable Thera Āyukusala (formerly Dr. Mirko Frýba, psychotherapist and psychology professor at the University of Berne, Switzerland); session recorded in May 2003.

Q: Bhante, you've spoken on several recent occasions about the dangerous misuse of the Buddha's teachings to coerce changes in other people's mind. You often emphasised that Buddhist practice, meditation in particular, is not a psychotherapy. Other points, such as Buddhist faith healing, Buddhist meditation used in politics, Buddhist rituals applied in social work, were also touched upon.

In some cases you seem to endorse the use of Dhamma elements to influence other people, yet in other cases you give a strong warning not to injure the other person's integrity, independence, self-determination and freedom of decision. Sometimes, it seems to me that your audience cannot quite tell when using the Dhamma in coping with everyday life is good and how far it can be used practically before it becomes either a harmful weapon or a cheap commodity.

Would you please explain succinctly how to discern when the use of Dhamma elements is good and when it isn't? Can you give some clear examples of good use and of abuse?

AT: My dear venerable friend, you are a Buddhist monk like myself, you are helping your lay followers, counselling them, teaching meditation... Let me answer you as a monk but also address the kind of lay audience you have in mind. The Buddha's methods are very powerful, tested through centuries of usage. The principal thing is to take hold of the whole Dhamma correctly from the very beginning. This is called in Pāli *yoniso manasikāra* or wise apprehension in English. We have an old Sinhala saying based on the Alagaddūpama Sutta — it's also often used in the scriptural commentaries: "Just as one must seize the snake by the head, one should grasp the Dhamma method rightly". Then one can get the snake's venom for medicinal purposes without harm.

Q: What venom should there be in the Buddha's Dhamma, Bhante?

AT: There is no venom in the Dhamma, of course. That's the problem in giving an analogy. You must not take the metaphor too far! The Buddha's Dhamma is proclaimed as "good in the beginning, in the middle and at the end". That brings us to a second important thing: "There is no need to cause suffering while helping someone to understand that suffering and overcome it."

No good teacher of Dhamma, no competent psychotherapist, no genuine meditation master, no serious counsellor would try to bring additional suffering to the person seeking help.

Q: But what about the Buddha revealing the truth of suffering within the framework of the Four Noble Truths? There are some professional group psychotherapists in Europe and in America who, in order to bring home that lesson, use various psycho-games in which they make one of their group an unwanted outsider or compel the group to say many ugly things to an individual within it. That member suffers heavily in order to help him thereafter.

AT: Buddha has taught the truth of suffering always in relation to the truth of freedom from suffering. He taught how to understand suffering in such a way that one can overcome it. The Buddha always taught how to cultivate good things, which can serve as a reliable basis for dealing with suffering and with the causes of suffering. He never asked

anybody to cause or to increase suffering in order to handle it better. There is always enough suffering in this world, we do not have to create any more. It is sufficient to help people get strong enough to admit their suffering, which they have so far tried to hide away from, and to show them the way out of it. This principle holds good for psychotherapists too. So now we get to a third thing important to the good use of Dhamma in helping others: Pay heed first to the personal assets and to the good things in the person's world before you start to deal with his or her problems and insufficiencies.

Q: It seems to me that all the three things that you pointed out as important in using the Dhamma to help others should be important principles for others besides Dhamma teachers, healers, counsellors and psychotherapists. They are important for anybody who wants to help some other person, aren't they?

AT: You're right. And these same principles are just as important for self-help.

Q: Are there some other principles you'd like to mention before giving examples?

AT: Well, I could go on, since this relates to my profession as psychotherapist, but it will do. Before coming to the illustrative examples, however, I'd like to formulate one more thing as important for helpers who use the elements of Dhamma in their professional work. It is the principle of four mindfully clear comprehensions (*sati-sampajañña*), especially the clear comprehension of realm (*gocara-sati-sampajañña*) — the three others can be dealt with later in connection with the promised examples. Here I want to stress that not only professionals but every helper should clearly know in which field he or she is competent and also be very prudent about those other fields in which he or she cannot act responsibly.

I think it's time I gave you an example now. What would you think of a highly skilled aero-engineer if he claimed he could help you in the realm of dental surgery? He'd proudly display his high qualifications and academic degrees in engineering and strengthen his position by telling you that he has already pulled out the teeth of many others. Would you accept him as a responsible dental surgeon? It's laughable, isn't it? He might then go on and tell you that he practices Buddhist dentistry and that he pulls teeth according to what he has learned from Buddhist texts. You'd run a mile! Yet I have met in this country, for example, a journalist with a Ph.D. in literature who claims to do Buddhist psychotherapy because he associates with mentally ill people and forces them to obey his dilettante interpretations of the *Satipatthāna Sutta*. I have also met here a scientist with a Ph.D. in physics who claims to see some similarity between the Buddha's teaching and sub nuclear physics and on top of that has studied hypnosis; he is using all this to legitimate his alleged practice of Buddhist psychotherapy. What do you think about these doctors?

Q: It's hard to believe, but I've heard you mention it before. You've also shown me the writings on psychotherapy by these pseudo-experts. What to say? ... I'd prefer to abstain from saying anything. But tell me, Bhante, how's something like this possible?

AT: It's only possible because the profession of psychotherapist is not yet known in Sri Lanka and there is no institution that could take steps to prevent misleading the public in this way. For centuries the mentally ill have been treated in this country by the traditional healers called *yakadura*, *shastrakariya*, *vedamahatea*, and also by those Buddhist monks who maintain the rural traditions despite modernization. The millions of this country's inhabitants have to rely upon that traditional health care — so far it is still available. The few thousands Sri Lankan city dwellers can seek the help of the handful of western trained psychiatrists here in case of mental illness. I have been meeting the Sri Lankan psychiatrists since the 1970s and was also invited by them to give lectures on psychotherapy. So I know what a hard job they have to satisfy the demand. They act more

like medical doctors and their therapy consists of prescribing drugs. There's not much time for talking with patients, let alone listening to them.

Q: But they must have some auxiliaries, social workers or lay therapists. What do you know about these?

AT: There are social workers in the urban areas; they're more clerks than therapists, though. Recently I heard about a programme organized by a Non-Governmental Organization called Basic Needs. They have just started workshops to train counsellors to go into the villages and do group work to help people overcome prejudice against the so-called mad. I think this may develop into something very good. During the years 1982–84, when I came to Sri Lanka to ordain as a monk, I was training a group of helpers who worked for an Institution called Sahanaya. I was teaching them the basics of group counselling, especially the skills of listening to the patient. This was like the approach I had been teaching in Switzerland to the lay counsellors helping to reintegrate drug addicts into society. In those days we had a lot of hopes about the auxiliaries we called lay psychotherapists. Later we had to give this up and admit that psychotherapy is a professional vocation that demands much formal training after university studies in medicine or psychology are completed. We had to admit that making "lay psychotherapists" out of obliging helpers interested in the working of the human mind would make as much sense as to make "lay gynaecologists" out of those interested in the working of that other part of the human organism. So let therapy be the job of doctors — I mean those with medical and psychological training.

Q: But I heard that a friend of yours, a Buddhist meditation teacher who was neither a psychologist nor a medical doctor, practised psychotherapy in Kandy after having learned it in Switzerland. That was Godwin Samararatana. What was he doing, then?

AT: Well, he was not doing psychotherapy. My dear friend, the late Godwin Samararatna, was a librarian in the public library of Kandy. In 1977 I bought an air ticket for him, brought him for his very first time out of Sri Lanka and let him stay six months with me in Berne. From there he made trips to other parts of Europe to get first hand experience of the European way of life. It was in Berne that he witnessed psychotherapy for the first time in his life. I had invited him to some of my group psychotherapy and psychodrama sessions.

Q: Did he understand what the patients were talking about?

AT: He couldn't understand what they said, as my patients were talking in Swiss German. But he could tell what was going on non-verbally. He saw how we treated them, he saw the co-therapists' working alongside. Sometimes he saw how deeply moved a person gets after having been understood fully, fully understood with compassionate empathy in regard to some traumatic experience he had never shared before. He saw how some patients were brought to tears, crying their hearts out over the insights won during the therapeutic sharing and reliving of old troubles. Even without understanding the words, he could see and emotionally share all these steps of catharsis — or of the purification of their mind, to use Buddhist terminology. Some of the sessions were video recorded with the patients' permission; then both the patient's communication and the therapist's interventions into the patient's reliving of problems were explained to Godwin during the playback of the video.

Q: Do you also allow him to see psychotherapeutic healing procedures with an individual patient?

AT: No, I never did. The main reasons were that it might disturb the process of healing and that the psychotherapist has to painstakingly protect the patient's privacy while he or she is

sharing the most painful and embarrassing experiences. Even fully trained psychiatrists and psychologists rarely get the chance to see another psychotherapist at work with an individual patient. But I introduced Godwin to some doctors who were getting postdoctoral training from me at the University Clinic. They spoke English with him and he participated in seminars and so on. He also saw what the psychotherapists' auxiliaries and psychiatric nurses do.

When he came again to visit me in Switzerland, he told me about what he was trying to do at the psychiatry department of Peradeniya Hospital in Sri Lanka. He gathered several obliging helpers from among his friends and instructed them how to help mentally ill people. On one of his visits, I introduced Godwin to my boss at the Educational Counselling Service, Prof. Kurt Siegfried, who was not only a psychotherapist but also a leading Swiss psychological counsellor. He came to like Godwin very much and even helped me in financing his further trips to Switzerland. Those two men had a relationship like son and father or apprentice and teacher. Prof. Siegfried methodically taught Godwin the basic skills of all counsellors and psychotherapists, namely how to listen, how to give feedback to the patient, how to help the patient redefine the problem so as to allow healthy coping and so on... I think that Godwin Samararatne is a good example of how a non-professional helper can come close to the healing activity that resembles psychotherapy.

Q: You must have really liked Godwin Samararatne a lot to do all this for him. Why did you? How did your relationship come about?

AT: Well, Godwin and myself were pupils of the same teacher, the Venerable Nyānaponika Mahāthera. I have been a meditation teacher since 1967 and have listened to hundreds of meditators, giving them the instruction to fit them according to their personal makeup. This is the basic principle of teaching (*sāsana*) in the way that fits accordingly (*anu*). You cannot teach advanced methods of meditation unless you are able to see clearly what is going on in the meditator whom you teach. This is why the Buddha is described as the incomparable teacher as he could see clearly the mind of any person he taught. Even if you cannot become that perfect, you can learn from a few hundred hours of listening to meditators how to diagnose their minds. Such a Buddhist diagnosis comes close to the diagnosis done by psychotherapists. And venerable Nyānaponika wanted me to show Godwin how I do such diagnosis. Do you see the connection?

This was a great challenge for me. And the more I came to know Godwin as a meditator, the more I liked him as a friend. We tape-recorded some of Godwin's interviews with my English speaking friends in Switzerland. The most interesting was his working with the meditator Pavel, who is now Venerable Ottama in Burma. Pavel, Godwin and myself were then analysing playbacks of those interviews, learning to discern which statements were relevant for the diagnosis of a meditator's state of mind, for deciding what should be the next instruction or next question, for understanding which are problems that would require psychotherapeutic intervention, which statements of the teacher were hindering the meditator, which statements were facilitating, and so on...

We knew that Godwin could not become a psychotherapist. But he was a loveable person and he became a teacher and a noble friend, a *kalyāna-mitta*, to many.

Q: So anyway, he got some experience from the psychotherapy sessions he participated in, and even though he was not a psychotherapist he could use this experience in helping people to deal with their problems, isn't that right?

AT: Well, yes.

Q: So let's get back to our previous question: How to distinguish between healing procedures, which are using the Dhamma in a proper way and those, which are just abusing its name?

AT: There are three ways to use the elements of Dhamma appropriately in healing procedures. The first way is using Buddhist techniques to make the healer's mind clean; the second is improving the relationship between doctor and patient by means of Dhamma so that the healing procedure itself can be used most effectively; and the third would be an application of techniques developed by the Buddha and his disciples for the purposes of directly coping with specific problems.

Q: Where would Buddhist faith-healing fit in? You and I recently watched some sessions where a Buddhist monk healed bodily diseases in his followers. How about that?

AT: We would have to ask the faith-healer himself what method he is applying and what particular elements of the Dhamma are involved in his healing actions. Most of the faith-healers, whether Buddhist or otherwise, cannot answer such questions, though. They would usually say that they strongly will the patient's healing or humbly ask the god to cure the patient — and for that they may repeatedly chant some magic formula. The whole healing procedure is usually embedded in some more or less elaborate ceremony. There is a book on Sri Lankan healing methods written by the Swiss psychotherapist Dr. Beatrice Vogt with the title *Skill and Trust*, published by Amsterdam University Press in 1999. There she analyses especially the traditional Buddhist psychotherapy used to this day by the majority of people in Sri Lanka; she also explains various other healing procedures, including faith-healing.

Q: What would you say in particular about those healing sessions by Bhikkhu Seelagavesi that we saw?

AT: The Venerable is performing the regular duties of a Buddhist monk and, in addition, he is employing his supernatural powers to heal the diseases of patients to whom he is called by their families. We could say that his is the way of Buddhist faith-healing. He is also using the power of the whole group of his devotees who take part in the healing sessions. We were invited to a house for alms giving and recited there the blessings and so on in the usual way. After the meal I was asked to give the usual sermon (*anumodāna*) and then Venerable Seelagavesi took over and gave meditation instruction. He explained some basics of mind working or *citta-vīthi* according to the Buddha's teaching of *Abhidhamma*, such as increasing the wakefulness of consciousness from slight object awareness (*paritta-ārammana*) up to the awareness of a clearly distinct object (*vibhūta-ārammana*). That was the foundation for the meditation that followed, which consisted of repeating the mantra that "the highest happiness is Nibbāna and the highest wealth is health". The same type of group meditation creates foundations for the healing sessions conducted by Venerable Seelagavesi, in which he directs the attention and well-wishing of the whole group to the particular patient. All this is perfectly alright; there is no abuse of Dhamma in what this venerable monk is doing.

Q: What would be an abuse of Dhamma, then?

AT: The abuse comes when some elements — it may be even some quite correct parts of the Buddha's Dhamma — are grasped wrongly. This means that the purpose is wrong: for example, using Dhamma to gain some personal advantage or to get power over others. Both such cases involve exploiting others and harming their personal integrity. There is also abuse when the purpose is right but the elements of Dhamma are applied improperly...

Q: Before we go on, would you give me an example?

AT: Abusing Dhamma for wrong purpose takes place when the monk — it could be a lay person too — is teaching Dhamma or using elements of Dhamma in healing so that he makes those he helps dependent on him, addicted to his ministrations. They begin by calculating, “I will teach this man meditation” or “I’ll do healing for him”; thereafter comes the second move in his game, “This man has to sacrifice his savings to buy a flight ticket for me and to treat me to luxurious hotels, etc.” This would be a case of calculated exploitation, which may even be followed by some such blackmailing as, “You have to do this and that for me, otherwise I will stop healing you...”

An example of abusing Dhamma to get power over other people is the monk’s or the lay teacher’s extracting blind obedience from their followers. In such cases the impostors promise the fulfilment even of unrealistic desires, not only healing of diseases. On this principle are based the destructive cults and sects whose members are ready to go as far as criminal acts when ordered to by their leader. In some religious communities they use scapegoats and even human sacrifice for the supposedly good contribution to someone else’s health and happiness. Even among Buddhists, we can sometimes find an impostor who promises to take upon himself the bad karma of the criminal acting according to his orders. This is of course not only abusing the Dhamma so as to get power, it’s also distorting the teaching of karma that is an important element of Dhamma. Nobody can do anything to change the karma results for another. Not even the Buddha himself would claim something like that.

Q: What example would you give of using Dhamma for good purposes but using it improperly?

AT: Someone who likes to help may be using for a good purpose wrongly chosen Dhamma elements or techniques that work well only under other conditions, in a realm to which they do apply. For example the *mettā* meditation of loving kindness is a good element of Dhamma, but it does not fit into *vipassanā* or any other analytical procedure. Another example is the misuse of the *asubha* meditation of bodily impurities for someone who has difficulties to mindfully notice body experience. Both these mistaken approaches become a real abuse when they are forced against the will of the person whom they are meant to help. These types of mistakes and abuses are very common amongst Buddhist helpers who are not well instructed in the Dhamma...

Q: What is included in being well instructed?

AT: Here we have to return to the mindfulness and clear comprehension we were talking about at the beginning. The first and most important endowment of a helper is the mindfulness called *sati* in Pāli. The other requisite of a competent Buddhist helper is the fourfold mindfully clear comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*).

They are the clear comprehensions of the purpose (*sa-atthaka-sati-sampajañña*), secondly the clear comprehensions of the applicability (*sa-upāya-sati-sampajañña*), thirdly the clear comprehensions of the realm (*gocara-sati-sampajañña*) and, fourthly, the clear comprehensions of the correcting (*asammoha-sati-sampajañña*).

When I gave you the first two examples, these were cases where the helper either has a really wicked intention or lacks clear comprehension of purpose. The third example of wrongly using elements of Dhamma for supposedly good purposes is a case when the helper lacks mindfully clear comprehension of applicability. This is the case where someone is using wrongly the four foundations of mindfulness and breaking the supramundane matrix of four satipatthānas into separate items for mundane use of healing. And now we have to include also the cases where mindfully clear comprehension of realm

is lacking, such as is the case when, for example, the helper forces his healing on another who, however, does not want to be that person's patient.

Q: These four clear comprehensions are not so easy to understand. Must every Buddhist know them?

AT: Every teacher of Dhamma, every instructor of Buddhist meditation and every Buddhist healer should understand them. Or else they should stop posing as Dhamma experts. On top of understanding and clearly comprehending the purpose, applicability and realm of every action, expert teachers, meditation instructors, healers and psychotherapists have to be able to mindfully notice the actual situation, the reality in which they want to act. That is why the Pāli term *sati-sampajañña* also includes mindfulness. Directing the mind to the purpose, for example, will not do. It is not enough to attentively focus the mind on the phenomena we want to deal with, as the mind is doing in *manasikāra* or attention. *Manas* means mind, *kāra* means doing or making; *manasikāra* or focusing the mind, is an active and intentional process. However there is no focusing in mindfulness (*sati*). Mindfulness is the acceptance of all reality, which would not exclude anything not belonging to the focus of mind. I have defined *sati* with much precision in my books *The Art of Happiness – Teachings of Buddhist Psychology* (1989) and *The Practice of Happiness* (1995), as also the four clear comprehensions. There I show that mindfulness is more than attention or perception; it is the extended maintenance of presence of mind.

Q: Is that so only in everyday life and in healing? What I want to ask is whether this applies also in the realm of satipatthāna meditation? When we mindfully notice phenomena and discern whether they are bodily ones, feelings, mind states or mind objects, isn't there also clear comprehension?

AT: Yes, it is. When a person is about to sit down to meditate, there should be mindfully clear comprehension of realm (*gocara-sati-sampajañña*) — that is to say, first of all clear comprehension of leaving the everyday life consciousness realm or *sabbadā-gocara*; this is then followed by clear comprehension of entering the realm of meditation (*jhāna-gocara*). In each realm different actions are proper and correctly applicable. So there then has to be mindfully clear comprehension of applicability (*sa-upāya-sati-sampajañña*). For example in everyday consciousness we act upon intentions and do things, but in the meditation we just make a note of the arising and passing away of the intentions and we do not act upon them. While beginning *satipatthāna* meditation, our purpose is first to get a comfortable posture, second to switch the attention to the primary meditation object, third to open the mind to whatever comes; then, fourthly, we discern what kind of phenomenon comes to mind and to which of the four foundations of mindfulness it belongs, and so on...

In each of these different realms of *satipatthāna* meditation, there has to be mindfully clear comprehension of the applicability of different procedures. Those who first decide to direct their mind to one of the four sets of phenomena, concentrating only on the body or only on the feelings, say, they're not practicing the meditation as taught by the Buddha. Similarly, there can be no practice of *vipassanā* meditation without proceeding through the stages or realms of experience in *satipatthāna* meditation as I have enumerated them

Q: Bhante, you have answered my questions about the abuse of Dhamma and the proper use as taught by the Buddha. You've given me examples of wrong and right use of Dhamma elements and procedures in meditation, healing, psychotherapy, counselling and in other forms of helping people. You stressed strongly that meditation is not psychotherapy and that only trained professionals can do psychotherapy. Yet I know that you are training both European and Sri Lankan monks in satitherapy, which — though theoretically based on the Buddhist Abhidhamma — is a form of Western psychotherapy.

Isn't there an inconsistency between what you say here and what you do elsewhere. How can you train monks who do not have the required professional background of psychologists and psychiatrists in that form of psychotherapy?

AT: Yes, I have been training some monks in satithery. But only those of my monastic pupils who are doctors or have a degree in psychology can play a psychotherapeutic role. The other monks, and laymen, who have not obtained the necessary university training cannot perform psychotherapy. But they can assist in conducting the group satithery sessions; these, however, have to be lead by a fully licensed satitherapist.

Q: Could you explain how even those who cannot claim to be psychotherapists may assist in conducting satithery sessions? What skills should they have? Can they conduct their own counselling sessions after acquiring satithery skills?

AT: These questions cannot be answered briefly. We'd have to devote a separate interview just to them. All I want to state now is that the principles of rightly applying the Dhamma are binding on every satithery assistant and every satithery counsellor. Let me emphasise the most important — valid both for the fully licensed psychotherapist and for the satithery assistant — and that is respect for another's integrity, independence, self-determination and freedom of decision.

Q: Let me respect, Venerable Sir, your decision to leave the answering of my questions about satithery to another interview. I thank you for your explanation so far.

The original session was recorded in May 2003 and revised by Upāsaka Nyānaloka.

The Venerable Dr. Āyukusala Thera mediates the Buddha's Teaching as a practical method of life mastering, as explained in his book, published in several languages under his lay name

Mirko Frýba.

The Art of Happiness – Teachings of Buddhist Psychology

(Shambhala Publications, Boston & London, 1989),

His most popular English book is

The Practice of Happiness – Exercises and Techniques for Developing Mindfulness, Wisdom, and Joy

(Shambhala Publications, Boston & London, 1995).

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