

The Buddha in Psychotherapy

Holidays are a time for increased attachment: to material abundance, to family togetherness, to vacation time, and to the fantasy of joy that comes with all of this. And yet often during after the holidays, many of us can expect to increase our visits to our therapists due to stresses, pressures, disappointments, and "holiday blues". While the image of Buddha often shows up the least in December, his teachings may be just the gift you'll want to bestow on yourself and your loved ones.

Western Psychodynamic approach might help to deal with the holiday visit to your family by giving you insights into 1) noticing patterns of dysfunctional family interactions; 2) how you may still be seeking parental approval and competing with your siblings; or 3) how your attitudes towards money and gifts may equate love with a price tag. Becoming aware of such patterns can allow you to approach your family with a little more self-awareness and self-control. You need to understand that by growing older you have become a person in "yourself", separate from your parents and siblings. Western Psychotherapy will train you with role plays to be assertive without being aggressive, and to say "no" without feeling guilt.

The Buddha in Psychotherapy would have a different approach. He would not probe into your idiosyncratic patterns of family interactions. He would not help you to build your self-esteem to feel OK about being "yourself", instead he would tell you to examine the inflation of your pride. He would tune into the universal part of your agonies coming from your "expectations" from each family member and intense "craving" for the pleasurable outcome. He will teach you to work on eventual elimination of cravings. Buddha will describe you and your greed for material looking like "a fish flopping in a river starved of water". Buddha will give you permission to enjoy the beautiful things and material in life, but without the crippling craving for having them.

Does this sound too complicated or too clichéd? Consider the simple practical solution suggested by Buddha. He would ask you to start meditating today and to train your body to observe your breath without distraction and without judgment. If you train your body to do this, it will automatically train your mind to do the same: watch your own emotional reactions without judgment. This state of reduced attachment to the pain and pleasures will mean reduced "craving" from expected pleasures. Thus you will take away the building blocks of pain – the craving for pleasure -- away.

Although Buddha never taught meditation as a way to deal with stress, such as the holiday stress, modern neuroscience has recognized the power of meditation in subduing our anxious or depressive reactions to life events. So to compliment your psychotherapy sessions, start meditating today to have a calmer holiday!