On Being a Sangha Counsellor.

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There has been in the minds of many counsellors and psychotherapists, a strict division between psychotherapy and religious advice. We could take that all the way back to Freud for whom religion was an infantile regression to dependence on a parent[1]. Other theorists such as Carl Jung, Victor Frankl, Roll May, and psychoanalytic writers as W.W.Meissner and Michael Eigen are not so coy. A quick web search on Christian pastoral psychology shows little evidence of such a distinction in the minds of pastoral psychologists.

Indeed, from a Buddhist perspective it would be a mistaken understanding of religion and psychology to differentiate between the two. The title of one of Lama Yeshe's books is *Becoming Your Own Therapist*. He says:

> "Buddhism is a method for controlling the undisciplined mind in order to lead it from suffering to happiness. At the moment, we all have undisciplined minds, but if we can develop a correct understanding of its characteristic nature, control will follow naturally and automatically. Therefore, no matter whether you are a believer or a non-believer, religious or not religious, a Hindu, or a scientist, back or white, and Easterner or a Westerner, the most important thing is to know your mind and how it works…If you don't know your own mind, your misconceptions will prevent you from seeing reality."
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> Lama Yeshe (1998, p45)[2]

Religion and psychology both work with the mind. Both are concerned with the relief of suffering and establishing healthy emotional relationships and healthy self-knowledge[3] I would like to suggest that the main difference between psychotherapy and religious practice is not so much in the methodology, but in (1) the aims and motivations of the client and the therapist and (2) the object of refuge of the therapist. Being a sangha counsellor means, to me, being aware of both long term and short term aims for both myself and the person who seeks my assistance. It means being aware of the power and purpose of meditation, prayer and mantra and ritual. It means acknowledging the deep sense of disconnectedness that Westerners experience and having some understanding of how this inchoate yearning for something more can be healed. Above all it means being aware of the object of my own refuge, the triple gem: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

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[1] Moncayo, Raoul, (2003) 'The Finger Pointing at the Moon' in Safran, J (Ed) *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism* Wisdom Publications, Boston, p331

[2] Yeshe, Lama (1998) *Becoming Your Own Therapist.* Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archives, p 45

[3] See, for example, Tan, Eng-Kong (2001) *Spirituality and Psychotherapy* Paper presented at The New Zealand Association of Psychotherapies, July, 2001

My own investigation into being a sangha counsellor is through my ordination and studies within the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. There is not likely to be a big difference between Gelug practices and those of Kagyu, Nyingma and Sakya traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, as they apply to this discussion. I am not so sure that my remarks would apply to other Mahayana traditions and even less certain they would apply to the various Theravadan traditions.

Western misconceptions about sangha.

Many Westerners think that anyone dressed in Buddhist robes is thereby a proficient meditator, at peace with oneself and learned in Buddhism. Many western sangha (and Tibetans teaching in the west), therefore, find themselves in a position where they are assumed to have inner knowledge and experience which they have not yet developed, and in particular to have some insight into personal problems of practitioners. It is a difficulty that can come from either the sangha or the practitioners, and sometimes both. Some Buddhist traditions have extensive training for their sangha. Others, like my own tradition do not require anything of prospective monks and nuns beyond a sincere attitude of renunciation. Where there is little or no training, the expectation of a Westerner that the robes endow the wearer with some wisdom is clearly unrealistic.

Even amongst ordained sangha who have had some training in Buddhism, there is considerable variation in what they are able to do and/or teach, as there are for various types of western counsellors and therapists. For those sangha with the qualification to teach within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, Berzin [4](2000) has identified eight categories: Buddhism professors, dharma instructors, meditation or ritual trainers, spiritual mentors, refuge or vow preceptors, Mahayana masters, and Tantric masters, and root gurus. From this division we can see that sangha may have teaching roles are not directed towards solving personal problems, particularly those teaching ritual. The robes we wear do not indicate which of these roles we may be eligible to hold. Anyone of these roles may be projected onto monks or nuns, even when they are newly ordained.

Of particular interest in terms of more direct therapeutic role are the dharma instructors and the spiritual mentors. The dharma instructor is differentiated from a Buddhist professor in that s/he has made some progression in discriminating awareness in addition to Buddhist knowledge[5]. This awareness develops from (1) listening to reliable teachings and/or reading reliable books (2) developing a correct intellectual insight based on these teachings and (3) developing correct experiential insight through meditation on the teachings. The spiritual mentor is distinguished from the dharma instructor through having developed greater stability in those realizations acquired at the level of dharma instructor. A root guru is spiritual mentor who has a deep heart connection with a particular student.

So far, the therapeutic role in Buddhism mostly is seen to reside either in the spiritual mentor (sometimes called guru or lama) or in the dharma instructor. To this we can add

[4] Berzin, Alexander (2000) *Relating to a Spiritual Teacher,* Snow Lion, Ithaca, New York.
[5] Berzin, Alexander (2000) *Relating to a Spiritual Teacher,* Snow Lion, Ithaca, New York, p70

dharma brothers and sisters. These are students who have participated in the same Tantric initiations and their related practices, though it often is used in the context of Sutra teachings and practices also. Dharma brothers and sisters support and encourage each other in their various dharma activities. This can also become a therapeutic role in some circumstances. A dharma brother or sister may be either ordained or lay

Cultural differences between Tibetans and Westerners give rise to further projections and misconceptions.

> "In establishing a disciple relationship with a Western spiritual mentor… a Westerner might appropriately ask for personal advice about private emotional problems or initial meditation practice. A mentor, however, is not the equivalent of a confessor or a cheap psychiatrist to whom we reveal each week every detail of our lives. Nor is a mentor a fortuneteller to whom we turn for divination concerning all personal decisions. The Buddhist custom is to seek guidance primarily from the teachings themselves."
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> Berzin (2000, p 114)

So we can see that there are different types of interaction and therefore different aims that occur when someone seeks help from a monk or nun. Similarly, in the west there are psychologists who teach at university and to the general public, psychologists who go to greater or lesser depths into the psyche of their clients, those how to conduct various psychological tests. There are differences between psychotherapists and counsellors.

Buddhism as a spiritual practice.

Perhaps the obvious difference between Buddhism and psychotherapy is that the former is seen as a spiritual practice and the latter not, though psychotherapy might be used in conjunction with a spiritual practice as in pastoral counselling. What then is a spiritual practice and how does it overlap with psychotherapy and counselling?

The distinction between a worldly, or samsaric practice and a spiritual practice is based on the motivation behind a method or practice and also on the object of refuge. If the motivation is only to attain happiness in this lifetime, then regardless of the methods used to attain this aim, it remains as a samsaric practice, even though it may have substantial humanitarian benefits. For it to be a Buddhist practice, the object of refuge is necessarily the Triple gem: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and is to be taken for granted in this paper. A beneficial worldly refuge may be humanitarian ethics.

There are three different levels of motivation (called the three scopes in Lam Rim teachings) which are defined as being spiritual practice within Tibetan Buddhism[6]. If the motivation is at least that of creating the conditions for a better rebirth in the next lifetime then that is the minimal requirement for the methods used to achieve that aim to be considered as a spiritual practice and the first of three motivations for Buddhist practice.

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[6] See any Lam Rim text e.g., Yangsi Rinpoche (2003) *Practicing The Path*, Boston, Wisdom Publication, pp 96-100

Of course, one quickly begins to realize that a better rebirth does not provide escape from samsara and generates the second level of Buddhist spiritual practice: adopting the thought of renunciation. Then one begins to realize how others are suffering and adopts the third level of Buddhist spiritual practice, the bodhicitta thought: to attain the state of enlightenment because that is the most effective way of relieving both one's own suffering and the suffering of all sentient beings. Through these motivations and psychological methods used to achieve their goals, one gradually attains a completely purified mind which is no different from (is of one taste with) the Buddha mind. [7]

A lay counsellor or psychotherapist is not concerned with future lives, renunciation or becoming a Buddha unless s/he happens to be Buddhist. Even then, the lay Buddhist therapist must take into account the readiness for spiritual development, or lack of it, from the side of the client. Nevertheless, a Buddhist therapist will be very aware of whether methods used to prevent suffering in this life will also create the positive mental imprints for future lives. A Buddhist therapist will therefore use methods for alleviating suffering learned from either Buddhism or from psychology, knowing that this can have benefits way beyond the awareness of the client.

If, as a therapist, my client has one of the three spiritual aims in seeking my help, then consciously or unconsciously, I aid this person's spiritual practice. If, as a therapist, my own aim for my client is for that client to achieve one of the three spiritual aims, then I am assisting that client in a spiritual path, whether my client realizes this or not, and whether or not my client achieves such an outcome. But these criteria do not require that I be ordained.

The great advantage that I have by being both an ordained Buddhist with some training in Buddhist practice, and a qualified psychotherapist is that I can address both spiritual and interpersonal issues when consulted. Indeed I am often consulted by both lay people and sangha for that reason. Is there a difference between an ordained Buddhist with qualifications on western psychology and a lay Buddhist with similar qualifications? I think not, except perhaps in the nature of projections from either the client or the Buddhist therapist. My efficacy as a nun is dependent on the quality of my Buddhist knowledge and practice, not on the cut of my clothes. I can think of many lay people who are equally dedicated to their spiritual path.

The spiritual mentor (guru).

It is the spiritual mentor, the guru or lama[8] whose role is often seen by Westerners as being close to that of the therapist. This is not the way the guru is seen by Tibetans:

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[7] That there is considerable overlap between Buddhist methods and psychological methods is made clear by Whalley, Malcolm (1990) Tibetan Buddhist Mind-Training in Crook, J., and Fontana D., *Space in Mind: East-West Psychology and Contemporary Buddhism,* Element Book, Longmead, pp 133-143. He draws parallels with cognitive-behaviour therapy, rational-emotive therapy, Gestalt, Rogerian, Kelly's Personal Construct therapy, and other therapies.

[8] I am using spiritual mentor, guru, and lama interchangeably. However, as Berzin points out, they are not always equivalent. 'Lama' in some contexts may just be a name given to a baby boy.

> "Establishing a disciple-mentor relationship with a teacher, with or without taking vows in his or her presence, does not necessarily mean that we go to the person privately for personal advice. Except for occasionally visiting to offer a ceremonial scarf of respect (kata, kha-btags) or to make some other small offering, many Tibetan disciples have never spoken privately with any of their mentors other than those in whose houses they might live. From a Tibetan point of view, asking about personal meditation practice, even from a lama with whom we live, implies a pretentious, self-important attitude. It gives the impression that we consider ourselves great practitioners. Tibetans highly value humility, especially concerning spiritual matters."
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> Berzin (2000, p112-3)

Nevertheless, the guru is the 'person who can really show you the true nature of your mind and who knows the perfect remedies for your psychological problems'[9]so it is not surprising that Westerners confuse the roles of guru and therapist. Young-Eisendrath[10] tries to solve this dilemma by asserting a fundamental difference between the psychotherapist and the Buddhist teacher (in this case, the Zen teacher), that is, that a difference in spiritual status . This difference, she suggests effectively eliminates the potential 'kinship' relationship which she sees as essential to the therapeutic relationship..

> "Within this kinship relationship, as I see it, patient and therapist experience themselves as human beings who are struggling together to try to bring about the amelioration of suffering in at least one, and more profoundly, in both... within an effective relationship, I believe, the therapist must feel and eventually convey the sense that she suffers also."
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> Young Eisendrath (2003, p310)

By arguing in this way, Young-Eisendrath puts the guru into a special and unattainable status. I doubt whether the distinction holds when the practitioner attains the same level of realizations as the teacher. This, of course is entirely possible, if not in this lifetime, then in some future lifetime. While there is a strict public hierarchy amongst Tibetan lamas, in private they can be quite different. I have been woken a number of times in the early hours of the morning by Tibetan lamas laughing loudly, but who publicly show great humility according to their status. The lack of a 'kinship' relationship can simply be an indication of a real difference in capabilities between the patient and the therapist or guru.

Differentiating a guru from a therapist is probably better done by investigating their respective aims and definitions. When asked what he meant by 'mental illness', Lama Yeshe (1999, p26)[11] replied:

> "By mental illness I mean the kind of mind that does not see reality; a mind that tends to either exaggerate or underestimate the qualities of the person or object it perceives, which always causes problems to arise. In the West, you wouldn't

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[9] Yeshe, Lama (1999): *Make Your mind and Ocean,* Boston, Wisdom Publications, p22
[10] Young-Eisendrath, Polly (2003) 'Transference and Transformation in Buddhism and Psychoanalysis' in Safran, J (Ed) *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism* Wisdom Publications, Boston p310
[11] Yeshe, Lama (1999): *Make Your Mind an Ocean,* Boston, Wisdom Publications

> consider this as mental illness, but Western psychology's interpretation is too narrow. If someone is emotionally disturbed, you consider that to be a problem, but if someone has a fundamental inability to see reality, to understand his or her own true nature, you don't… we consider people who are unaware of the nature of their dissatisfied mind to be mentally unhealthy; their minds are not healthy.'

This is a much broader definition of mental illness than any indicated by the latest DSM manual. Yet when we stop to think about it, those people who are mentally disturbed according to DSM-IV criteria also are grossly deluded in their view of reality. The therapist, likewise, has a deluded view of reality, though it may be more subtle. We would not expect the therapy of a deluded therapist to go very far. This is exactly what Lama Yeshe is asserting. Mental health, from a Buddhist viewpoint is only finally achieved at Buddhahood.

Different philosophies generate different methods. Where a psychotherapist might use a client's projection to examine underlying strategies, the lama will use, as mentioned above, a practitioner's projection to teach Buddhist principles, although the lama would not think in those terms. Within the lama's terminology, the practitioner's projections, together with any transference or counter-transference, are simply karmic imprints. Lama Yeshe[12] (1999, p29) points out that rather than spending time with people individually, spiritual mentors would explain the fundamental nature of problems and the possibility of transcending them; then teach the basic techniques of working with problems. After the practitioner has tried these methods, the spiritual mentor would check to see what their experience had been.

My experience of the best of the Tibetan gurus is that they are very skilled at picking up the projections of western students and diverting the projection into the realities of Buddhist practice. Of course, not all lamas have such wisdom and there are many stories of lamas and gurus who have manipulated their students for money and sometimes for sexual and other favours. It would seem that counter-transference is a cross-cultural problem.

Dharma instructors and dharma friends

For sangha like myself who do take an active concern in the personal problems of practitioners, the most apt title is that of 'dharma friend' rather than 'dharma instructor' or 'spiritual mentor'. As such, then the 'kinship' quality described by Young-Eisendrath is very important. I, and the practitioner, are fellow travelers on the Buddhist spiritual path. Even in that context, when the situation involves an area of knowledge and experience which I have attained, but the practitioner has not, then my role is clearly one of a teacher. On these occasions to revert to 'dharma friend' may be unhelpful. I am not, however, in the category of 'guru', and my own realizations are small and do not have the stability that one would expect from a guru's realizations.

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[12] Yeshe, Lama (1999): *Make Your mind and Ocean,* Boston, Wisdom Publications

Sangha as therapists

The issues which ordinary sangha face when they have a therapeutic role are not much different from those of the lay Buddhist therapist, that is, having the necessary qualifications, being aware of one's own limitations, and being aware of the different aims of Buddhism and psychotherapy but there are a few more unique differences between sangha and lay counselors.

Counseling for marital or sexual problems.
It is inappropriate to seek help on sexual matters from a celibate monk or nun. Sangha are advised not to become involved with pairing men and women and therefore, on the whole, do not perform marriages. It is also inappropriate for a monk to be alone in a room with a woman and vice versa for a nun. If there is no-one in the room or within hearing, then at least the door should be left open. This could affect confidentiality issues, but it also provides a level of safety which western therapists might seriously consider.

Effect of robes.
For sangha, the robes are a daily reminder of vows, particularly the vow of renunciation. In the east where sangha are common, the robes do not excite attention any more than a child in school uniform. But in the west, sangha are a rare breed. We stand out. This means that, despite the sincerity of renunciation, we may also have unconscious motivations for taking ordination which are not so relevant to Tibetan sangha. Such unconscious motivations include the desire to be noticed, fear of intimacy, escape from difficult relationships, being important the guru, or demonstrating some spiritual superiority.[13] If such unconscious motivations are not recognised, of course they will interfere with the quality of any counselling.

For the spiritual practitioner seeking advice from a monk or nun, the robes represent, rightly or wrongly, some spiritual awareness not available to the lay practitioner. This means that it is easier for sangha to move from the more immediate dynamics of personal suffering to a much more extensive view. As a nun I do not have to explain, or apologize for, my philosophical view or spiritual practice. Sangha are more easily able to lead the practitioner from seeing their suffering in terms of the dynamics of this life to seeing their suffering in terms of their karmic imprints and, when appropriate, to seeing it in terms of the fundamental ignorance of the nature of self.

For other people seeking counselling, robes are a hindrance. The robes may represent hypocrisy, or authoritarianism, or foolishness. These people are unlikely to consult sangha. We need lay Buddhist therapists as well.

Differing aims.
There are the differences that arise from differences in the aim of psychotherapy compared with the aim of Buddhism as I suggested in my introduction. These differences also need to be taken into account by lay Buddhist therapists.

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[13] See, e.g., Suler's (1993) list of neuroses of Buddhists practitioners in Safran, J (Ed) *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism* Wisdom Publications, Boston p49-50

Western spiritual mentors

It may be that the role of the spiritual mentor in the context of western culture will begin to include the more personal issues raised by Westerners. In other words, the spiritual mentor may develop a more overtly psychotherapeutic role. This becomes more likely as more Tibetan teachers gain a deeper understanding of unique cultural aspects, of the western mind, and as more Western therapists gain a deeper understanding of Buddhist theory and practice.

While most methods used within traditional Buddhist practise are also used in western counselling and psychotherapy, I can find nothing directly comparable to the psychoanalytic practice in which the projections of the client are used by the therapist to transform the inadequate strategies developed in early childhood. This does not mean that a psychoanalytic role cannot be used be either lay or sangha counsellors. Rather, it can be viewed as a methodology which is particularly suited to the western mind. Our western minds are likely to have been split in the insidious cultural demand for individuality and independence and the narcissistic consequences that arise from this split.[14]. From a Buddhist point of view, the question to ask of any method is whether or not it leads to a complete stop of human problems forever[15]. It is not difficult to argue that healing narcissism has its place in the complete purification of the mind asserted in Buddhism. If the best method to do this is through psychodynamic or psychoanalytic methods, then that is what Buddhist therapist needs to know.

Unconscious or implicit motivations such as narcissism are not unknown in Buddhism and they afflict sangha as well as lay people, at least until they achieve liberation. In Buddhism we call these karmic imprints. The deepest and most subtle of the unconscious motivations is no less than the basic ignorance which Shakyamuni Buddha determined as the source of all suffering. The non-Buddhist therapist is not concerned with this basic ignorance but is satisfied when the patient or client has achieved a reasonable level of comfort in relating to his/herself and to his/her world. This is why Lama Yeshe states, as quoted above, that people who are unaware of the nature of their dissatisfied minds, that is unaware of their basic ignorance, are still mentally unhealthy.

The shift in psychotherapy is from a false and divided conventional self to a valid and flexible conventional self, both of which may be viewed as inherently existent. The shift in Buddhism is from the view of an inherently existent (but conventionally valid) self to a non-inherently existent self. Psychotherapy, in common with many aspects of Buddhist practice is concerned with developing a valid view of the conventional self. To achieve the Buddhist shift, one needs a valid view of the conventional self. Hence there is an important role for psychotherapy within Buddhist practice.

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[14] See, e.g., Welwood, John, (2000) *Toward a Psychology of Awakening,* Shambala, Boston, chapter 14
[15] Yeshe, Lama (1999): *Make Your mind and Ocean,* Boston, Wisdom Publications, p36

Western spiritual mentors who have training, experience and realizations in both western psychology and Buddhist psychology will be in a strong position for taking on a mentor role which includes a psychotherapeutic role. This is a big ask!

Spirituality and psychotherapy

Jung[16] said that 'all religions are therapies for the sorrows and disorders of the soul'. What does this mean? As Jacobi[17] (1967, p132-3) puts it, psychotherapy brings about a redistribution of psychic energies, of recognizing, enduring one's shadow whereas religion 'creates a living relation between man and the supra-personal and gives him his proper place in the order of the universe. Of course, Buddhism does not use the word 'soul' but in this context we can perhaps consider the soul to be that subtle part of ourselves that feels disconnected: from others, from the environment, from ourselves, and particularly from the source of ultimate compassion and wisdom that here we call Buddha and in other places we call God.

This yearning for something deeper in the west we call yearning for that which is spiritual. We can, from a Buddhist perspective, call this a yearning to develop one's Buddha potential. It is this Buddha potential which is 'supra-personal' and its realization means becoming 'of one taste' with the primordial purity of the Buddha mind.

If sangha have a role beyond that of the lay practitioner it may be that the robes represent this subtle re-connecting in which we become one with this perfected mind. Sangha have a special responsibility to take the yearning of people for this connectedness and show them the way to the 'one taste' not just through psychotherapy but also through study, meditation, prayer and ritual When we are truly able to do that, then maybe we are qualified spiritual mentors.

To summarize, I would like to repeat what I said in the introduction:

> Religion and psychology both work with the mind. Both are concerned with the relief of suffering and establishing healthy emotional relationships and healthy self-knowledge[18] I would like to suggest that the main difference between psychotherapy and religious practice is not so much in the methodology, but in (1) the aims and motivations of the client and the therapist and (2) the object of refuge of the therapist. Being a sangha counsellor means, to me, being aware of both long term and short term aims for both myself and the person who seeks my assistance. It means being aware of the power and purpose of meditation, prayer and mantra and ritual. It means acknowledging the deep sense of disconnectedness that Westerners experience and having some understanding of how this inchoate yearning for something more can be healed. Above all it means being aware of the object of my own refuge, the triple gem: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

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[16] Jung, Carl (1978) *Psychology and The East,* Ark Paperbacks, London, p50
[17] Jacobi, Jolande (1967) *The Way of Individuation,* Hodder and Stoughton, London.
[18] See, for example, Tan, Eng-Kong (2001) *Spirituality and Psychotherapy* Paper presented at The New Zealand Association of Psychotherapies, July, 2001