

## Narrative Therapy and Buddhism: Paths Toward Liberation

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This paper is an examination of a few ideas and practices in both narrative therapy and Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> My intention is not to make lineal comparisons nor say that narrative is a Buddhist practice. I will try to expand on our understanding and applications of narrative work by adding views from a 2500 year old spiritual tradition. I believe that therapists too often have minimized religious and spiritual practices, determining them to be outside the therapy domain. It is important for us to take religious and spiritual practices seriously in our work, learning from them and attending to them in our therapeutic conversations.

I am focusing on Buddhism and narrative as they are central to my personal and professional life. Buddhism has been a foundational component of my life for over twenty years. Its values, practices, and beliefs have helped me through both the good times and difficult ones. I have become familiar with narrative therapy over the past ten years and also find that it embodies many values that I hold dear in my life. One strong commonality is both promote the possibility of liberation for people. I think of liberation as a freedom from the personal, interpersonal and political/cultural dictates through which we describe and live our lives. Buddhism very clearly addresses this form of liberation. Narrative, while not espousing any specific spiritual component in any overt manner (see White article in this issue), values liberation as it sides against all oppression. This practice can lead to a liberated life.

In this paper, I will specifically address narrative's practices of externalizing problems, deconstruction, and re-authoring, and the importance of community. I will briefly discuss how Buddhism relates to these ideas and

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<sup>1</sup> I will be principally referring to Tibetan and Southeast Asian Buddhism and their corresponding meditation practices.

practices and discuss two tenets of Buddhism, impermanence and an absence of fixed identity or self.

### Impermanence and an absence of self

Narrative therapy proposes that our identity is something fluid and changeable. Problems arise as we are given or take on a rigid identity or one that is inconsistent with ways that we like to see ourselves. Buddhism also does not adhere to any fixed identity or permanent self. There is can be no bounded, masterful self, but only one culturally and contextually constructed. This view is based on the Buddhist understanding of impermanence. Everything is transitory and nothing will last forever, including any idea of self. The self is merely a component of a larger interconnected system of sentient beings.

Impermanence is seen most directly in our striving for happiness and pleasure. As the Dalai Lama (1999) said, we all have the potential to be happy. We also have the potential to be unhappy and to entertain harmful thoughts and act in ways that bring pain to ourselves and others. Narrative therapy writers have described how the larger culture supports and encourages these negative ways of thinking and being.<sup>2</sup> We are led to believe that it is good for us to subscribe to dominant cultural practices, such as capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and racism, as it will be to our personal benefit and/or make us happy. Our lives are filled with “if only” thinking that is shaped by the culture: “If only I had more money; If only I were thinner; If only I could have sex with that person.”

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<sup>2</sup> There are numerous narrative therapy writers who have all given excellent accounts of these issues. For specific examples, please see the writings of Janet Adams-Westcott, Gene Combs, David Epston, Victoria Dickerson, Jill Freedman, Jenny Freeman, Alan Jenkins, Ian Law, Dean Lobovits, Stephen Madigan, Bill Madsen, Kathy Weingarten, Michael White, Jeffrey Zimmerman, along with many others.

Buddhism stresses how the ingredients of “happiness” are impermanent and transitory. We might feel good for a bit of time, but it does not last. As narrative writers have stated, we develop an identity in the context of these cultural messages and realize that they do not actually bring us the happiness that they promised. Therefore, much of the work of narrative therapy is helping people become free of these negative stories and live more with other versions of themselves. These alternative stories represent identities that are more consistent with how people like to see themselves.

#### Four Noble Truths

Given that we always live within a culture, we cannot escape the influences that are always around us. We will always be faced with challenges from the culture to be or act in certain ways. The Buddha addressed these ideas most directly by delineating the *Four Noble Truths*, challenging the pursuit of pleasure.

According to the Buddha, suffering is everywhere and unavoidable, since old age and death are inevitable. Suffering is caused by our desires for pleasure and avoidance of pain. We usually seek out happiness, grasping at pleasures offered to us, and push away that which is painful or may cause a sense of unhappiness. The cause of suffering is not singular or linear, but a vast connection of multiple interdependent origins. The Buddha finally said there is the possibility to end this suffering, and this can be done by following a path that includes meditation practice or training the mind.

While not trying to make a direct correspondence, narrative can be viewed as taking a similar approach. It says that problems are inherent in all cultural contexts and supported by the larger culture in which we live. While we ascribe to the specified actions and ideas of the larger culture, these do not bring us the pleasure that we desire. For most of us, following this path leads to some form of dissatisfaction, i.e., problems. We cannot ever really know what causes a

problem, as there are so many discourses within which we live, influencing the ways we think and act. Causes can only be constructed approximations. Narrative therapy sees a way of resolving problems with a method of deconstruction and re-authoring.

### Deconstruction and Externalizing Problems

While the naming of a problem and externalizing it is not essential in narrative work, it is a common practice. Naming the problem can be difficult in some instances, as people often present a number of different dilemmas. A specific problem may change several times in the course of therapy or within a single session. However, one problem may present itself more than others, as there are some, like anorexia, depression, lack of confidence, or evaluation, that receive enormous cultural support and can take over more of a person's life and thoughts. A specific problem may return again and again, offering new challenges each time around.

As we deconstruct problems, we begin to see the larger cultural contexts within which they reside. We do this by asking questions about problems: examining justification and explanations; development, history, influences and supports; special qualities, strategies and techniques; effects and intentions; and future plans and preferences. Deconstruction, done with the problem as an object, not only helps the person get some distance from it, but also allows the person to see the problem as not so massive or whole. It loses some of its power and hold on the person.

Mindfulness meditation is similar to deconstruction, as a practice of making thoughts, feelings and sensations the object of observation. With this practice there is separation that allows people to become observers of the process, able to describe, examine, and comment on the unfolding process, but not affected by it in its usual ways.

Meditation requires the development of certain amount of concentration to begin the practice of mindfulness, cultivating an ability to attend without being pulled into the endless stream of thoughts, feelings and sensations. It is a precursor to holding a position of non-attachment.

Concentration is also important in narrative work. In order to participate in re-authoring work, a person needs some ability to separate from the problem and begin to attend to alternative, preferred identities without being consumed by the problem. It is expected that problems will re-emerge again and again, but with concentration and mindfulness one can continue to deconstruct them, and not be continually overwhelmed by them.

The Buddha recognized the role of problems in our lives and labeled them “hindrances” (Goldstein, 1976). He specified several key hindrances: desire, lust, and grasping at sense objects; hatred and anger; laziness; and doubt. For each of these he recommended staying with the process of making the hindrance an object of observation, cultivating mindfulness. In addition, he offered antidotes to these hindrances, such as remembering to understand impermanence, generating lovingkindness towards others, doing something active, and asking questions. He recommended that we do this with a sense of balance.

If we were to take some ideas from Buddhism in examining problematic stories, we might approach them with a sense of lightness and balance. It is this balance or equanimity that will eventually undermine problematic stories, not allowing them to take hold in our lives, and enabling us to nurture ones that are filled with compassion and caring for ourselves and others. Both Buddhism and narrative recognize that problems will always be there for us, as we cannot escape cultural influences and the tendencies of our minds to move toward desires and away from pains. We do not have to be reactive to them, but address both with a sense of equanimity.

Re-authoring

Deconstruction allows us to see problems in their larger context and to obtain some distance from them. Re-authoring, a process that may take place at any time during therapy, is the acknowledgment, support and nurturing of the less visible, yet desirable aspects of our lives. It is making those preferred, alternative ways of being and thinking more known and accessible to us. As Michael White has so often said, re-authoring is not just accenting the positive, but seeing, understanding and supporting what is truly meaningful to each one of us.

The Dalai Lama (1999) speaks of the importance of promoting and supporting positive and useful aspects of ourselves and trying to reduce the negative ones. He stresses how we should train the mind to let go of the negative unhealthy thoughts and unskillful actions, and nourish ideas and actions of kindness, generosity, and compassion. While these are not mandated for change for everyone, they are seen as an antidote to suffering.

Given this understanding, Buddhism could be interpreted as a “modernist” approach, as it proposes specific ways of being in the world. Buddhism’s even takes a formal stand by offering up “precepts.” While these are principally for monks and nuns, they can also be seen as guidelines for all people. These include not killing, not stealing, avoiding sexual misconduct, not lying, and not taking intoxicants. All of these are directed towards helping people “wake up” and live more fully in the present.

Buddhism does recognize the unique individuality of each of us, yet sees each person as not being “special.” While each of us has different ways of being in the world and grapples with different issues/hindrances, Buddhism sees each of us as connected to all other sentient beings. We all share the same processes of experiencing suffering and have the same abilities to realize happiness. To be special would be to stand apart from others, making our experiences better or less than another’s. What is given privilege, if there was such a thing in the Buddhist cosmology, is the role of individual experience. The Buddha frequently

said not to trust anyone or any particular set of knowledges, but to trust only your experience.

Narrative clearly aligns itself with post-structural thinking and attends to what people find positive and useful within the context of their own lives. While narrative therapists follow their clients, they are continually looking for unique moments and aspects of people's lives that further fill out their unfolding preferred narratives. While at first blush, narrative language is seen as complicated and considered only for more "verbal" people, the emphasis is always grounded in one's experience: not the therapist's experience, but the consumer's. Narrative is truly a therapy of experience.

In narrative, each person's life is seen in its own context. What is right for one is not necessarily right for another. As I think about some of the alternative stories that I have heard people develop, I continually see how these narratives are filled with compassion, hope, generosity, and lovingkindness for themselves and others. These are the paths to liberation. By living with these qualities as forefront in one's life, one avoids harming other beings, as acting in these ways does not bring about negative effects. Borrowing from Buddhism, we might also be looking for those moments and actions in our lives that are filled with generosity, kindness, and compassion for others in a more concerted manner, and respond with more kindness ourselves.

A Buddhist view of alternative narratives might also warn us to beware of becoming attached to them. They may be preferred stories about our lives, ones that lead us to actions of compassion and generosity, but they can still present us with another way of developing a fixed identity. Holding onto this new way of thinking about ourselves can bring about suffering. If we were to take Buddhism seriously in our re-authoring practices, we might also consider holding alternative narratives with a sense of balance and a lightness, as we do problematic ones. Touch upon them, but do not make them your fixed identity. Realize that this identity will also shift and change, as it is as impermanent as the problematic,

pain-filled identity ones we dislike. Treat these new identities with love, but do not fall in love with them.

## Community

Michael White (see article in this issue) states how “being in community with others...is a significant outcome of our practice.” He continues to say how this work is a “joining of stories of the lives of others around shared themes and values.” Hearing other’s stories about our lives helps accentuate the more valued realms of our lives and bring us into connection with others, making our lives less self oriented. Our lives become populated and supported by the lives of others. White, along with other narrative therapists, has referred to the practice of developing “communities of concern” around the problems and triumphs in our lives.

One implementation of a community of concern is a reflecting team or, as it is more currently described, participation in a definitional ceremony with an “outsider witness” group. While initially a reflecting team was designed to offer new ideas and understandings, White has shifted the focus so the comments of the witnessing group are less centered on the team and their ideas are organized around the people who have come for the consultation. The comments highlight the unique or counter-problem elements of the descriptions and actions in their lives. This witnessing community adds credibility to people’s preferred lives and allows people’s descriptions and actions to be joined by the lives and stories of others. As narrative points out, our negative ideas and actions have been supported by cultural discourses that are very rich in resources. It is often difficult to find extensive support when attempting to enact the necessary antidotes to these pervasive negative thoughts and behaviors. The role of community, in its numerous forms, such as witnessing groups or letter writing campaigns, can offer this kind of support.

In Buddhism, the idea of community is also very important. It is actually one of the three jewels of the teachings, called the *sangha*. The *sangha* is the community of Buddhists that gather together to practice the teachings of the Buddha and support one another in this movement toward liberation. This can be in a formal sense in a monastery or informally with a group of meditators who meet together. Through community, meditators are able to receive the added support to make it through the numerous hindrances that can take one away from a regular practice or application of Buddhist ideas in the world.

As therapists, it is also very useful to have a community of support (such as a supervision group) that will offer encouragement to our efforts. I have often worked with other professionals who have radically different ideas than I do. Their ideas are often more professionally dominant or mainstream than mine, and in earlier years it was easy to enter into a self-doubting mode about my knowledge and abilities. Fortunately, I have worked with people who carry a different view of me, one that is more congruent with how I like to think of myself. The larger narrative community has done this for me and many others, as well.

## Conclusion

While there are similarities between narrative and Buddhism, there are also many differences. Buddhism takes several steps that narrative does not. Most notably, Buddhism believes that there is an unconditioned state, outside of culture, where one is neither influenced positively nor negatively toward any particular position. This is a state of choiceful choicelessness, in which the person can clearly see the multitude of perspectives available and move in a direction with great compassion and caring for all humanity. This is a state approaching enlightenment that very few ever reach.

In my own life and work, I can take steps toward liberation. I can apply my Buddhist training to my work when I think and act with compassion, hope, kindness, and generosity. I can continue to look for these qualities in the lives

others share with me, paying attention to ways that these qualities may be present for them. I can remember to treat both problematic and alternative stories with balance and lightness, not being swept away by either one. Both are impermanent and will change. By maintaining the qualities that Buddhism believes to be healthy states of mind, including mindfulness, compassion, and lovingkindness, I might be a better therapist with the people I see.

## References

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