

Buddhism and Depression: Is Buddhism Depressing?

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I would like to talk about a problem that has become increasingly common in modern societies like Singapore and other developed countries, and that's the problem of depression. When you look at traditional societies you see that they don't even seem to have a word for this problem. That's not because people in such societies didn't get down in the dumps sometimes, it is not because depression was unknown; it was. But certainly it appears that it was not as common as it has become in most modern, affluent industrial societies. In fact, depression has become so common that companies which manufacture antidepressants such as Fluoxetine, Valium, Prozac and similar drugs, make massive profits. If you want to make a good return on your investment put your money in a company that sells antidepressants. Because so many people have become so depressed, life for them apparently being meaningless, the only way they can get through it is with the help of antidepressants.

As we just said, depression is not unique to modern societies and it is not a new problem either. In fact, it is described in ways familiar to us in the Buddhist scriptures. We have several words or terms in English for the different types and intensities of depression – melancholy, despondency, being downcast, being gloomy, etc. Winston Churchill used to suffer bouts of severe depression and called it his “black dog”. The main word for depression in Buddhism is *visāda*. The word *soka* is often used for grief, the type of depression usually associated with the death of a loved one.

However, the Buddha also used *soka* for a range of negative feelings accompanying loss, failure, self-deprecation and fear of death. He describes the symptoms associated with guilty rumination like this. “When a fool is on his chair or bed or resting on the ground, then the evil bodily, verbal or mental deeds he did in the past cover, shroud and envelope him. Just as the shadow of a great mountain peak in the evening covers, shrouds and envelops the earth, so too, the evil bodily, verbal or mental deeds the fool did in the past cover, shroud and

envelope him. Then the fool thinks ‘I have not done what is good, I have done evil’ and he sorrows, becomes downcast, laments, weeps, beats his breast and feels distraught.” Some of the other symptoms associated with depression as described by the Buddha and immediately recognizable to a modern clinician include loss of interest in work and food, drooped shoulders, gloomy expression, brooding and being uncommunicative.

We could say that there are **three types of depression**. The first type is due to some chemical malfunction in the brain. This type of depression sometimes responds to drug therapy so we will not talk about it here. Leaving it aside, there are two other types. There is what we might call occasional depression, and then there is what we can call existential depression. Let us have a look at the first of these for a while because it is quite common. We all feel sad, we all grieve, we all feel down in the dumps, gloomy, moody or depressed from time to time. In such a state we may feel boredom, a loss of interest, we may cry or feel like crying, and this may continue for some time. But eventually, in a few days or a week or two, we usually get over it. This occasional

depression can be caused by a variety of things, some of the most common being the unexpected death of a loved one or a major setback in life. You might say that occasional depression has a rational basis. For example, if somebody we know and love has been very ill for a long time, and we have been expecting them to die, and they do die, we might go through a period of sadness but we are unlikely to become depressed. Having had time to psychologically prepare for their passing we are shielded from depression. Likewise, if a loved one dies at the ripe old age of 85, 90, 95 we will feel sad for a while but we are unlikely to become depressed. Knowing that they have had a long life, that they have come to the end of their natural life-span, we accept their passing as a part of the natural course of things. However, if a couple have just married and one dies, or if a relatively young person dies, or if someone dies suddenly and unexpectedly, it is not uncommon for their parents, siblings and friends experience grief that extends into depression for quite some time. But even then eventually they will recover and return to their ordinary state.

Sometimes we feel depressed because of failures in life leave us with a sense of inadequacy. This aspect of depression is a serious problem here in Singapore and in societies like Japan, very competitive societies where great stress is put on being successful, first, top, or “ahead of the pack”, as they say. Even some approaches to religion contribute to this stress-causing attitude. I saw a sign

outside a church just recently which was headlined “Be a Winner!” The pressure to “be a winner” is particularly hard on young people. They are required to live with the stress that even adults have difficulties coping with. Prior to exams there is a tremendous anxiety and worry, after the exams, depending on what the results are, there is a feeling of relief and elation or depression.

Failing to live up to one’s own and other’s expectations and demands can cause one to feel shame, inadequacy and depression.

Another cause of depression is a sense of loss in relation to success, wealth, fame or youth. I have frequently come across people who have told me that their business was going well, everything was marvellous, and then they lost everything in 1983/84 when there were problems in the economy in Singapore. They lived in a million-dollar flat, now they live in a \$200,000 flat. They used to have five cars and now they have one. They used to send their kids to Raffles, now they go to the less prestigious Outram Secondary. And as a result of this they feel quite depressed. There is still enough to eat, they are still financial secure, but in terms of what they had before they have a sense of loss, that they have “come down in the world”, as the saying goes. This sort of thing is common in the world of entertainment. You frequently hear has-been entertainers bemoaning the fact that once they were in the spotlight, that the paparazzi chased after them, that their doings were reported in the popular press, that fans wanted their autograph, that their next film was a source of interest, and that now no one takes any notice of them. Many such entertainers find it very difficult to adjust to going from celebrity to obscurity and they often try to cope with it with alcohol or other drugs.

But perhaps the most common form of occasional depression due to the loss of something is

related to aging. When we are young we have vigour, health and good looks. And then as we age, one by one, these gifts take their leave from us. Many people adjust to this process quite well.

They take heed of the advice of the Desiderata and “take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth”. But some people, particularly those who had an action-packed youth; successful sportspersons, glamorous actors or actresses, top models and so on, look upon aging with foreboding and dread. They become overly anxious about their health, their

looks, how they are perceived by others. Of course you can stave this off the signs of aging for a given period of time. And now with science and plastic surgery you can make yourself look younger. You can put padding in here, there, everywhere, you can wear a wig, dye your hair, have a facelift, have several facelifts, get a much younger boyfriend or girlfriend, you can have Botox injections. When all such things can no longer disguise the truth, those who have done this fall

into depression. So all this would be examples of depression we have from time to time; they are related to certain events or certain circumstances.

Is there anything we can do to help us shake off such occasional depression to that it is not prolonged to the degree that it becomes a problem? According to the Buddha a natural part of reality is what he called the Eight Worldly Realities (*aṭṭhaloka dhamma*) . These are **Gain** and **Loss**, **Obscurity** and **Fame**, **Blame** and **Praise**, **Happiness** and **Sadness**. If you look at ordinary human life, you will see that it is an interplay, an alternating sequence of these states. One may last longer than another, one may be more intense than another, several may occur at the same time, but sooner or later they will give way to one of the others. We are the centre of attention now, fade into insignificant later and then perhaps become famous again. We were poor, then we became rich and now we have lost it all. The so-called

Positive Thinking Movement, in either its secular or religious forms, promises that if we just keep negative thoughts at bay, keep repeating positive phrases, and “set goals and go for them” we will fulfil all our dreams and desires. Such comforting but deluded ideas do not prepare us for the inevitable ups and downs of life – in fact they un-prepare us for them. Keeping in mind the Eight Worldly Realities holds us back from going overboard when we have gains, fame, praise and happiness, and prevent us from becoming too cast-down and despairing when we have loss, obscurity, blame and sadness. Being sad and depressed but reminding ourselves that it is natural and normal to sometimes feel like that and that “**this too shall pass**” is strangely empowering. It gives you the strength to endure it and the patience to see it out. The Buddha’s advice to give occasional thought to the Eight Worldly Realities is one of his most practical gifts to humanity.

However, there is another type of depression which is becoming increasingly common and which we may call existential depression. This is when people

suffer from depression for extended periods, and to the degree that it starts to effect normal functioning within society. They become melancholic, gloomy, pessimistic, withdrawn, they suffer from what is called chronic depression.

Now there are certain reasons for this too. A great deal has been written on it, doctors are often confronted by it, as are psychiatrists. There has been a lot of discussion as to why it is that in societies that are relatively affluent, secure and where there's a great deal of opportunity, why there is so many people suffering from chronic depression.

Well, the first cause of this, and one that is not always taken into account, is that it may be a result of deep insight. If it is true, as the Buddha says, that "existence is suffering", and if we come to see this deeply and truly, it may indeed make us feel rather depressed, at least for a while. If it is true that loss follows from gain, and sadness follows from happiness; and indeed that life ends in death, then perhaps it is understandable that people become depressed. When they have a good hard look at reality, it is understandable that some people may feel gloomy. And of course it is not only Buddhism that says that life is suffering. Perhaps the most profound books in the Bible, certainly the most philosophical, is Ecclesiastes, which opens with these words: "Vanity of vanities!

All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises, and then goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full. All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun."

Commentaries on these powerful words often say that they were composed by a tired old man.

But why should this be so? Perhaps they were written by a thoughtful, observant young man.

Bertrand Russell, certainly no pessimist, said that "the world is horrible, horrible, horrible!" One of

the more popular and influential philosophers of this century, Jean-Paul Sartre, said that "life is nothing more than a useless passion". Even the existentialists

Christian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, came to the conclusion that life is absolutely meaningless. People have often suggested that these philosophers were pessimistic. But if we look at most of these philosophers we discover that they weren't particularly pessimistic in how they lived their lives. When you read their writing you might get that impression. But somebody like Jean-Paul Sartre led a very full, a very fruitful, and apparently a relatively happy life; certainly no less happy than the majority of people. And Bertrand Russell can truly be said to have "lived life to the full" in every sense of the term and he had a wonderful sense of humour. Simply putting one's finger on reality, and seeing in some senses it is meaningless and empty doesn't necessarily lead to depression. *Wise people see life as meaningless and decide to give meaning to it, to fill the void with something worthwhile.* I would say that the Buddha was one such person. But some people do not have the resources to do this and this truth makes them depressed. And probably the reason for this is that they have come to understand that life has not fulfilled their expectations. They have wanted life to be one particular way. It is emerged that it is not like that; they wanted life to be full and fulfilling, they wanted things to go the way they wanted, they wanted to live forever, they wanted be continually happy. They find that life isn't like that, it doesn't work that way, and they plunge into depression.

They decide to turn their back on a world that has disappointed them and they become profoundly depressed.

But there are other approaches to having a deeper understanding to the nature of reality. Some people see that life can be rather meaningless, that no matter how sweet the fruit you get, it all ends in death. So rather than becoming depressed, they decide "Okay! I have a few more years to go, a few more decades, and by god I'm going to enjoy it." They become hedonists, they decide to cram as much pleasure into the time they have left. This attitude is well summed up in that old saying: "Eat drink and be merry, because tomorrow we die." For a while this approach to life may work, you can stave off reality, you can keep it at bay, but of course one of the ultimate outcomes of hedonism is a slightly different version of depression; becoming bored and jaded. And probably one of the most unendurable of all sufferings is boredom. It is like attending a long uninteresting talk delivered by a particularly uninspiring speaker. You want it to end but it just drags on and on.

Some people see life like that, and certainly hedonism usually ends in boredom. The reason for this is because of the very nature of the sense organs. The sense

organs have nerves in them and when these nerves are stimulated in a particularly way we experience pleasure. But just as we get calluses on our fingers or hands when we use them often, we get what we might call psychological callused when the sense organs are continually stimulated. If we experience pleasure a lot, we enjoy it; but after a while, to get that same level of satisfaction, we need to stimulate the senses to a higher degree. For a while this delivers fulfilment and satisfaction, and then the senses start to get dull again. And then we need more stimulation; and of course it gets to the stage where, you can't go beyond a certain point. And then you have boredom, or worse, perversion.

There is another reaction to the realities of life. Some people react to the undesirable aspects of existence by retreating into delusion. They can't find any meaning in life, they lack the creativity to give it some achievable and worthwhile meaning, so they look for ideologies, philosophies or religions with claim to offer meaning, or at least comforting promises. You can, if you try hard enough, convince yourself that you're going to live forever in some paradise beyond the clouds.

And when you get there you will meet all your friends again, and it will just be wonderful. We'll all live together forever. Or you can convince yourself that there is a plan, that everything has meaning, that everything that happens, has happened in order to teach us something, to show us something, to deliver justice. And of course it is possible for some people to continue such beliefs for a long time, some people forever. But many people cannot.

Sooner or later, that old spoiler reality breaks through and their delusion is shattered. And then they fall into despair, they have what is called a spiritual crisis. This is not a solution to the problem. So if it's true that reality is without meaning and that existence is suffering, and if becoming depressed or becoming hedonistic or retreating into delusions are not attractive responses to these realities, what else can we do?

What is the Buddhist solution to the problem of the nature of reality and the problem of existential depression? Well, the first thing about Buddhism is that it doesn't offer an easy solution, it doesn't fob us off with cheap and shallow promises. The very first principle in Buddhism is: "Get it straight right from the beginning! Life is suffering." Some people will turn away from that; they would say: "Oh! How depressing", or "How pessimistic." But sooner or later a

thoughtful and intelligent person will come to realize that it is true. In some people's cases; in fortunate people's cases, they see this when they are young. That gives them plenty of time to adjust to reality. Many people don't see it until they're much more mature, until they have had more life-experience. They think life is marvellous, life is wonderful, I'll live forever, I'll be young and vital, and all things will be bright and beautiful. But then they start getting old; their teeth fall out and their friends die, and they read in the newspaper about the horrible things human beings do to each other. Gradually they start to become depressed, disillusioned, world weary, and only then do they turn to the Dhamma. But the wonderful thing about the Dhamma is that it doesn't try to pretend; it confronts you with the major problem, the essential problem of existence, right from the very beginning. Now one may believe that or disbelieve it. But if you take it as a given, it starts to make a lot sense, you see the evidence for it everywhere. In Europe when Buddhism first started to become popular, at the very beginning of the 20th century; one of the most popular philosophers of that time was the German Schopenhauer. And he was very influenced by Buddhism, and he was a profoundly pessimistic man, and he built a marvellous philosophical system based on his own and Buddhist and Hindu ideas, which had a profound influence on German Romanticism and young Germans at that time. This is why some of the very first Buddhist monks were Germans; they came from an intellectual background which was rather pessimistic.

And for many decades, it was people who had turned away from life, disappointed and pessimistic, that became interested in Buddhism. Because they thought that Buddhism was reaffirming what they already believed; that the most appropriate response to life is sadness, gloominess, heaving a sigh of resignation. Of course now that Buddhism is better known in the West, considerably better known, we realize that it is not all there is to the general Buddhist outlook. While Buddhism says that life is suffering, it denies that the most appropriate response to that is depression and gloominess. In the Samyutta Nikāya the Buddha talks about the steps that lead naturally one from another, as a result of seeing the true nature of existence. It's a discourse that is not often discussed, but when we're talking about existential depression, it's a very meaningful discourse. In this discourse the Buddha describes a causal chain leading to spiritual liberation. The first link is suffering (*dukkha*), the second is faith (*saddha*), then tranquillity (*passaddhi*), then joy (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*), concentration (*samādhi*), knowledge and vision (*yathā bhūta ñānadassana*), *nibbidā*, the fading of passions (*virāga*), and the tenth and final one is freedom (*vimutti*). And the Buddha says that the right attitude and response each stage

will lead naturally and smoothly to the next one. Now if we look at several of these steps or links we will see that understanding *dukkha* need no necessarily lead to depression. In fact, it can give a great deal peace and happiness, even joy.

The first is suffering. We suffer. Even if we are healthy we may be suffering psychologically. The very nature of existence is that it is suffering, inadequate, unsatisfactory, jarring, conflicted. We respond to this in different ways; some people try to deny it, some try to cram in as much pleasure as they can to distract themselves from it. But there is no escape, we will have to face it eventually. Now when we face suffering, and we just see it as it is, not trying to explain it away with myths or stories, then we discover that there is a philosophy that starts at this very point. It

starts at the place we are at, the First Noble Truth – suffering. The Third Noble Truth is that suffering can be overcome. And if we come into contact with the Dhamma it tells us what we can do about this. We can have faith that there is a way to transcend this suffering. That is, we develop faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. We start to practice the Dhamma, perhaps with varying degrees of understanding, varying degrees of commitment. But if we walk the path with confidence and diligence, it will lead to tranquillity. We start to become calm, more relaxed, more reconciled to suffering rather than being angry at it or depressed by it. So faith leads to tranquillity. When the mind is tranquil we become joyful. This is not the exuberant “jumping for joy” joy, the rambunctious “Yippee!” joy. It is a noticeable but unobtrusive delight, intellectually as well as bodily. This leads naturally to happiness, a subtle background feeling of well-being, satisfaction and contentment. The Buddha says that when we are happy, when we tranquil and

joyful, it becomes possible to meditate, it becomes possible to concentrate, it becomes possible to start to adjust and transform the mind. So happiness leads to concentration. And when the mind is very concentrated it is easier to look within oneself. When we start to look at ourselves, we develop a state which the Buddha calls the knowledge and vision as things as they really are. Now normally when we have a glimpse of things as they really are, through the filter of our hopes, wishes, and expectations, we easily fall into despair or envelope ourselves in delusion. For example, if you’d lived through the First World War, and you had been told it was “the war to end all wars”, and 21 years later another one started, you might become depressed and melancholy and lose faith in humanity. But when you have a clear, accurate and complete understanding of

why things are like this, why such things happen, a quality the Buddha called *nibbidā* emerges.

Now this term is usually translated as loathing or disgust, words that suggest strong negative feelings. Disgust is what you feel when you reach under the hospital bed, take out the bedpan, remove the lid and “Yuck!” Disgust is what comes over you when you see a dead animal covered with maggots. Loathing and disgust are very strong words which fail to capture the meaning of *nibbidā*. Perhaps disenchantment is better. We become disenchanted, and under normal circumstances we are indeed very much enchanted. Our presuppositions, dreams and hopes, unrealistic hopes, have enchanted us, they have mesmerized us. A clear-eyed seeing of things disenchant us. The “magic” goes out of it. Interestingly, in one of the Buddha’s discourses, he described it as being like a man watching a magician perform. The magician pulls rabbits out of hats, makes things appear or disappear, and does all sorts of remarkable things. And the man together with the rest of the audience is entertained, impressed, enchanted. “How did he do that?” he says with wonder. And then he has the opportunity to sneak backstage where he sees all the magician’s apparatus; the strings, the trap doors, the mirrors, the carefully concealed assistants, and his sense of wonder, his enchantment, disappears. He doesn’t feel disappointed, he doesn’t feel angry, and he is certainly not disgusted. But the enchantment has gone. So perhaps the best translations of *nibbidā* is disenchantment. When you see things as they really are, you become disenchanted.

However, the root of the word *nibbidā* is *vid*, which means to know, giving us words such as *vijja* (knowledge), *vidura* (wise), *viddasu* (smart, cleaver) and also *vidushaka*. Now in Sanskrit drama the *vidushaka* is the jester. As in the western tradition the jester in India evoked laughter, but he often did this by pointing out uncomfortable truths, things people usually tried to avoid thinking about or looking at. Only the jester could make fun of the king and survive. And when he confronted people with such things they would laugh, perhaps uncomfortably or with embarrassment, perhaps uproariously. Aristotle put it well when he said: “The world is a tragedy to those who feel, and a comedy to those who think.” So there may be this underlying meaning in *nibbidā* – when reality is seen as it really is some will be disenchanted, others will laugh. When we see that we have been tricked all along we laugh because the joke’s on us. A similar thing happens when you tease a child by telling him or her that you have a sweet in your closed fist. He grabs at it but each time he does you take your fist away. Eventually you let the child catch and open your fist. When he discovers that there is no sweet,

no nothing, well, one child may feel disappointed, another may laugh; he or she sees that the joke is on him or her.

The Buddha continues, saying that *nibbidā* leads to the fading of passions, *virāga*. *Rāga* actually means colour. *Virāga* is what happens when something colourful is left in the sun – the colour starts to fade. Like this the passions don't just go, they gradually become less intense and compelling. Lust and hatred, fierce ambition and greed gradually lessen. Things don't upset you so much, you don't get as excited about things as you used to. In time you become serene, at peace and reconciled to life. According to the Buddha, this leads to Nirvana. One starts to experience that highest of Buddhist qualities, equanimity, in the face of the Eight Worldly Realities; Gain and Loss, Obscurity and Fame, Blame and Praise, Happiness and Sadness. Rather than being elated one minute and despondent the next, we have equanimity, we are centred and with a sense of balance. If we are suffering from long-term depression, the best cure for this is the acceptance of reality. Now most people will only accept death, after somebody close to them has died, and they have gone through a period of depression. Most people will only accept one or another of the vicissitudes of life once they have been wounded by them and they have gone through a period of depression. But if we practice the Dharma genuinely, we come to understand that the Dharma is not like a lot of conversional religions which try to convince us that everything is wonderful, that everything is marvellous, that everything will go well so long as we just believe.

There are two responses to reality, one is that we can pretend it is different from what it is, a pretence we may be able to keep up for a long time. The other one is to gradually reconcile ourselves to reality so we come to understand it, we come to accept it, and this is the path of peace. This is the path that generally leads to a freedom from depression. This is the path that eventually leads to *akuppa catovimutti*, the utter freedom of mind. And that is the aim, that is the goal, that is the culmination of the Buddhist life.

In the loving memory of Ratnajeewa Ganegoda, 1948-2017

Sukhā matteyyatā loke atho petteyyatā sukhā.

Love of one's mother and father is true happiness in the world.

Dhammapada 332

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