
Mental Health and Buddhism

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by Bob Bennett

Buddhism has played a part in many of the recent advances Western science has made about the brain. Much of this is due to the Mind and Life Institute which opened a series of dialogues between Western brain researchers of various disciplines and Buddhist monks including the Dalai Lama. I suspect that Buddhism will also make subtle changes in the way it views mental health issues as a result of these dialogs.

One of the findings to come out of these dialogues is that meditation (and pursuing creative endeavors) increases the size and activity level of the left pre-frontal cortex. Those with a more active left pre-frontal cortex have been found to be happier, more peaceful and calmer. In contrast, those with a more active right pre-frontal cortex have been found to be more depressed and prone to spontaneous anti-social behavior. That's the politically correct way of saying becoming angry and violent.

Buddhism looks at mental illness differently than Western psychologists. In the U.S., the DSM-IV sets out specific behaviors and the existence of certain types of delusions as being necessary to receive a mental health diagnosis. In Buddhism, anyone in the grip of strong emotions; anger, lust, greed, jealousy, etc., is showing signs of having mental health problems.

In addition, it is believed that there are two types of people who will be prone to develop a mental health problem; those who take on too much responsibility, and consequently spend an enormous amount of time thinking; and those who take on too little responsibility, and spend little time developing their mental abilities. It is also believed that individuals have one of five vibrational aspects. It is not that one vibrational aspect is better than any other, but that individual contentment occurs when individuals pursue activities that are in harmony with that aspect.

Not being in harmony with your vibrational aspect results in creating a dissonant resonance frequency which manifests itself in depression and self destructive behaviors. The further out of harmony an individual goes, the greater the tendency for destructive behaviors.

Recent findings, such as the shrinkage of the hippocampus during the onset of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the changes in the brain when Schizophrenia is left untreated for long times, may result in minor perspective changes in the Buddhist view of mental health problems.

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