

**Louise Gordon PhD**

**"Where Education, Experience and Compassion Meet."**

## **You Don't Have to be a Buddhist to Practice Buddhist Psychology!**

### **How Buddhist Psychology Can Benefit You and Your Patients**

I'd like to start by thanking you all for coming to this talk, and by thanking Harry for inviting me to give it (mention birthday). Rather than have this be a lecture, I would greatly prefer a discussion format, and would like to know what YOU would like to get from this hour in terms of information that could help you in your work. I also know that many of you are familiar with at least some of the concepts I'll be discussing, such as mindfulness (By the way, how many of you were here for Donna Forgey's talk on mindfulness meditation?). What I'd like to do is give the first part of the talk and then ask for questions, to see where we are. Then we'll go from there. If there is anything that's not clear though you don't have to wait, please raise your hand and I'll clarify.

First a few words about Buddhist psychology. What attracted me to Buddhist psychology was the blend of the practical and the spiritual, as well as the emphasis on compassion and acceptance of what is. I always had a hunch that there was more to me than my little ego and now here was confirmation, as well as very practical advice on how to work with that ego so that it didn't run my life! And lo and behold, I found it worked with clients as well, and takes a lot of the stigma out of having a "mental disorder". Buddhist psychology's approach seems to be that we're all in this together and we all have our "stuff" to work out and there's really no judgment about it. There is also the belief that what seems very solid and real is in fact not, and so much of what we anguish about is really an illusion anyway,

since we and all of life are in constant flux. Basically this is the idea of impermanence, another concept central to Buddhism and Buddhist psychology. Life is short, nothing and no one is here to stay, and at any moment we could be gone. So why not live wisely and from the heart? All of this taken together had tremendous appeal to me and helped motivate me to learn and practice more, as I continue to do.

Today I've chosen to talk about the work of two rather diverse individuals, Tara Bennett-Goleman and Pema Chodron, and talk about how their work directly applies to ours. I'll be covering 2 main themes:

- 1) **Working with difficult thoughts and feelings through mindfulness and transforming them into positive tools**
- 2) **The power of compassion and the open heart and how these can transform adversity and make us stronger**

First, I'd like to share with you a bit of the process that I went through preparing this talk since it ties in rather directly with what this talk is about. I was anxious for all the usual reasons, nervous about speaking in front of a group of very knowledgeable mental health professionals, etc., but there was an additional reason, which had to do with the personal nature of this subject matter. Buddhist psychology is not just something I use with my clients; it is not a series of techniques or tools, though it encompasses that as well. For me it is becoming a way of life, something I experience every day, and so I realized it would be hard to give this talk in an impersonal way. And naturally that made me anxious, since it's always been easier to hide behind the persona of "psychologist" and keep my personal self out of it. So I decided to do a little work with the anxiety, instead of distracting myself with a thousand other things in order to avoid it. So I sat down on my cushion with my anxiety

and decided that instead of treating it as the enemy, as I usually do, I would try to let it in, let myself feel it, perhaps even befriend this all-too-familiar demon. So I sat down, closed my eyes, did some mindful breathing, and let the feelings in, along with the all-too-familiar thoughts that accompanied them: “You can’t do this, you’re really going to screw up,” etc, etc. I let all of it in, breathed, and simply let it be. Continuing the exercise I checked in with my body and let myself feel the physical sensations: a bit of queasiness and an overwhelming desire to sleep. I forced my self to stay with it, stay conscious, and then went to the next step, which was to bring in some compassion, for my poor anxious self. I did this by simply focusing on my heart center and allowing myself to soften. At that moment I realized that part of my fear about giving this talk was that I might make myself vulnerable by disclosing some of what I was experiencing. This in turn reminded me that vulnerability is another key concept in Buddhist psychology and one of the most central in my therapy practice as well as in my own personal growth. I somehow felt comforted by this realization, and the anxiety, which only a few moments ago had been the enemy, was now being met by loving-kindness and was starting to feel very different. I could feel my heart start to soften and a few tears came as I connected with some of the old beliefs I still held about myself. Then, wonder of wonders, I realized that the anxiety had lessened, and I that I felt better and could continue my work. That, in a nutshell, is how this process works. You can already see a how #'s 1 and 2 entered into the process I described. Mindfulness is obviously the basis for all of this, and I know many if not all of you are already familiar with this concept. Tara Bennett-Goleman’s book, Emotional Alchemy, is a wonderful blend of cognitive and Buddhist psychology, which are actually highly compatible. Her definition of mindfulness is “a meditative awareness that cultivates the capacity to see things just as they are from moment to moment....It steadily observes feelings as they come and go.” This

is truly the essence of mindfulness, and as simple a concept as it is, those of us who try to practice it even for a few minutes a day know how hard it can be and how much the mind wants to escape and be distracted. Tara takes schemas and schema therapy (is everyone familiar with schemas? -- persistent negative emotional habit, usually learned in childhood) and takes it a step further, adding the component of mindfulness and placing it all in a larger, ultimately spiritual, context. The idea of emotional alchemy is taking these negative emotional habits and transforming them, through mindfulness and compassion, into a state of greater clarity and lightness. The first step in overcoming the maladaptive pattern is, of course, catching it and becoming ever more mindful of it. This is done simply by practice, and hopefully with some expert help. With practice one becomes aware of when a “schema attack” is underway, i.e., someone has “primed” our schema and we find ourselves behaving quite irrationally. (Give example here of deprivation schema-- client whose husband makes a date for a romantic dinner and forgets the date or has to work late, etc.) The next step entails getting in touch with the emotions accompanying the attack and surrendering to them rather than trying to fend them off. This often needs to be done with expert help as well, particularly with clients who have problems with affect regulation. Bennett-Goleman (and many others) makes a strong argument that acknowledging the feelings and being willing to deal with them honestly and in the moment is key to healing. What facilitates this in turn is, of course, breathing (always important) but also connecting with the heart. What this means is helping a person, find even the tiniest bit of gentleness or compassion within and connecting with that feeling. For some this will be easy, for others, seemingly impossible, at least initially, but it can be done. Connecting with compassion and gentleness is a direct counter-measure to the harsh super-ego, and has the ability to suck the energy right out of it. Or perhaps “melt” is a better word. In any case, it works. Connecting

with this energy, even if for split-second, breaks the chain of reactive behavior that so many people struggle with, and gives the person time to respond in a new way rather than react as he or she has done a thousand times. Another way of framing this is that it helps develop and strengthen of the witness self (also known as observing ego), and we know how important this is. There is now a much greater choice in how the person will respond, particularly in stressful situations.

### **QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION**

**Next:** Pema Chodron's work is all about dealing with adversity and using it to open the heart. She does this in a delightfully pragmatic, humorous, and compassionate way. She is an American-born Buddhist nun running a monastery in Nova Scotia. She's written many books and I highly recommend them as well as her audio- and videotapes. Her basic tenet is that we are already OK and already have all that we need. There is no need for self-improvement; we just need to remove the obstacles that keep us from perceiving reality clearly. Pema's work has made and continues to make a huge difference in my life and in my work. The focus of her work, not unlike the Jungian approach of working with the Shadow, is on how to stop running away from ourselves and our lives, especially those parts that cause us pain and that we therefore dislike. The theory, and this is Buddhist theory, is that it's not the pain itself that causes suffering, but the avoidance of pain, the efforts we go to push it away and numb ourselves. The antidote to this is, once again, connecting with the compassion within ourselves and using adversity to "wake up" and help heal ourselves and others.

*"Soft Spot"* Earlier when I was sharing some of my process I mentioned vulnerability, specifically my fear that I would allow myself to appear vulnerable in front of you and how much anxiety this caused. I don't know about you, but I haven't met a lot of people who

enjoy feeling vulnerable or who will even tolerate it. Most people cringe at just hearing the word. Vulnerability is a central concept in Pema's work and she specifically talks about something called "the soft spot". This refers to that place in us that feels most vulnerable, exposed and tender. It is usually associated with the heart center. When we're angry with someone, if we take a closer look (or feel) we will usually discover that our soft spot has been touched in some way and that there is usually fear and hurt underneath the anger that we would prefer not to feel (freeway example). However, Pema believes that working with the soft spot is at the core of healing if we can muster the courage (= heart) to face and feel those feelings. The soft spot is, literally at the heart of this approach to growth and personal transformation because it is where our most genuine feelings may be found. Moreover, once we accept and embrace our vulnerability, we discover the real gift: the enormous strength that lies within it. When we are vulnerable, we are also the most open, authentic, and honest. Ironically, and to our great detriment, we insist on associating vulnerability (which literally means "able to be hurt") with weakness, and the myth continues to be perpetuated in our culture. So the goal is to fight this myth, embrace our vulnerability, befriend it, learn to trust it, and ultimately realize its great value.

Pema Chodron's work also has, in my opinion, profound implications for stress and anger management, for example, teaching adolescents how "not to set up the target for the arrow." This is also called learning how to "hold your seat" and basically means not reacting to others aggressively. You teach people that when they're provoked, they can avoid the endless attack-counterattack cycle by not reacting, and therefore breaking old habits that control them. The idea is to help make people aware of the benefits of attaining some mastery over their own emotions and hence their behavior. You help them see this as a strength rather than as a weakness (especially challenging with younger folks but not

impossible). I tried this out with an adolescent group here at the hospital some months ago and they responded quite well to it, to the idea that they could gain self-control and that this made them strong. Conversely, each time they react aggressively toward another, they become in a sense a “walking target,” which places them in a position of weakness. The futility of this cycle is something almost everyone (with the possible exception of our government) can understand!

So, these are just a few examples of how I have found Buddhist psychology to be of great use. I thank you and would welcome any more questions at this point.